

Contents

<i>2-21 May</i> : diary pages from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), Israel (Liza Rosenberg), the United States (Marc Ellis), and Italy (Germana Pisa)	3
From Slovakia. No Tramps , by Giorgio Mascitelli	12
<i>31 May</i> : from Iraq (R.)	16
Football and the ‘dream of something’ , by Franco Toscani	21
World (Cup) , by Giusi Busceti	33
<i>4-10 June</i> : from the United States (Marc Ellis), Italy (Lucianna Argentino), Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), and Morocco (Jihane Bouziane)	34
From Vietnam. Speechless glances for glimpsed words , by Antonio Maconi	48
<i>14-19 June</i> : from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), and the United States (Marc Ellis)	62
From Thailand. A Couple of Days in Mer Awng , by Ken Klein	65
<i>22 June-13 August</i> : from Ukraine (Veronica Khokhlova), Israel (Liza Rosenberg), Morocco (Jihane Bouziane), the United States (Laila El-Haddad and Marc Ellis), and Iraq (R.)	73

Contributors and translators

95

Subscription

99

The news items in the right column were taken from “la Repubblica”, “The New York Times”, “The Washington Post” and www.truthout.org.

Cover by Sebastiano Buonamico.

The pictures. On the front cover: Beirut, August (photo by Marco Parolin); on the back cover, Pa Cheo, Vietnam (photo by Antonio Maconi). We thank the authors for allowing us to publish them.

This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to **Here -notes from the present, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone -fax 0039-02-57406574, email: massimo parizzi@alice.it.**

“Here-notes from the present” is written so that it can be read ‘as a novel’: from the beginning to the end in sequence. This is **an invitation and an exhortation** to the reader: many diary pages make little sense if not read immediately after the previous ones and before those that follow.

Diary: May to August 2006

Here

notes from the present

Kyiv, May 2

Veronica Khokhlova

One of the first wonderful, sunny days this spring. A day off, too, and magnolias are blooming in the 'old' Botanical Garden.

Karkur, Israel, May 2

Liza Rosenberg

In just under one hour's time, the state of Israel will come to a standstill for two minutes, and the only sound we will hear will be the melancholy wail of a siren, reminding us that today we mourn. We mourn for our fallen soldiers, and we mourn for those killed in terror attacks. Israeli television programming is dedicated to the fallen, with a continuous run of personal stories of those who have died and those they left behind. Songs on the radio are sad and beautiful, songs of love and loss, of young lives cut short before their time. One can't help but be swept up in this wave of national mourning, especially given that nearly everyone knows someone who has been killed, or someone who knows someone, etc. It is a loss that is tangible and current, and the wounds are very much open, far from healed.

May 1. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants marched in dozens of American cities. Most of the demonstrators' ire was directed at a bill passed by the House that would increase security at the border while making it a felony for an illegal immigrant to be in the country or to aid one.

Following Holocaust Remembrance Day, I got into a brief discussion with another blogger, as we wondered whether our native-born counterparts felt as emotional upon hearing the siren as we did, as immigrants who had chosen to make Israel our home. Sadly, we came to the conclusion (following conversations with the native Israelis in our lives) that we, as people who had not grown up with the siren, were more moved emotionally. Now that we've reached Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terror, I wonder if today's siren is felt differently, if our young Israelis are more moved by the symbolism of an event that touches them personally, as opposed to the siren of Holocaust Remembrance Day, which marks an event that for many Israelis is a historical event.

One of the most interesting facets of this day, though, is the switch. The switch that we will make this evening, as Israel transitions straight from deep sadness into pure, unadulterated joy. Within moments, Memorial Day turns into Independence Day, and the celebrations for Israel's 58th year as an established state begin. Fireworks, festivities and happy pandemonium take over the country from north to south, as each city and town tries to outdo not only its own previous celebrations, but also those taking place in other towns. Singing and dancing, free concerts and performances, children and teenagers happily running through the streets with their friends... Only in our land of extremes could such a transition of emotions be possible. And yet, I can't help but wonder about the families of the fallen. Do they make the transition as well? How is it possible to be mourning the loss of a child, a parent, a spouse, a sibling in one moment, and celebrating

our independence the next? I can't even imagine being able to do such a thing. I question whether it is wise to mark these events so close together, whether the mourning on one day makes the next day even more unbearable, as you are once again left alone with your pain while everyone around you has moved on. When we mark the event of our first son's passing, whether or not we actively mark the day, I am careful never to schedule a joyful event on that day or the next, whether it be dinner out with friends, a concert or show. I don't do it. I can't. All this for a child who was with us for less than seven months. How do these parents do it, after losing a child who's been with them for so much longer? How do they make the switch? Strong people they must be.

In any event, we will be quietly celebrating this evening, barbecuing on our porch with He (my blogging partner) and family, watching the fireworks with our children as our dog cowers in the shower, shaking uncontrollably as he waits for it all to be over, as tradition dictates (which will inevitably be followed by weeks where he will refuse to go out after dark for his evening walk, afraid that the fireworks and other loud noises will catch him unprepared out in the open). Tomorrow, if all goes according to plan, while every other Israeli will be outside searching for a few blades of grass on which to start their barbecue (I've seen people barbecue here on traffic islands), I will be comfortably ensconced on my couch, watching Israeli films from the 60s and 70s and running around the house after the little one, who has no need for such traditions, despite the fact that he's a first-generation native-born Israeli. Whatever happens, *yihyeh tov* (it will be good).

Kyiv, May 10

Veronica Khokhlova

Holidays are over, Mishah's gone back to Moscow, the weather's horrible (rain, wind, +7° C), and Marta seems to be sick, since last week actually... She has a little bit of a dry cough at night and her breath sounds like light snoring every now and then. She did have low-grade fever a few days ago, just once: 37.5° C (99.5° F), but she doesn't have a runny nose—nor is it stuffy. Before these symptoms appeared, she was making this funny sound all the time: it sounded like rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr but was actually made at the back of her throat, perhaps due to the excess saliva. It was a fun sound to make and to listen to, but she's not doing it anymore. Apart from the cough and coarse breath, she seems to be totally fine, and this is why I'm not calling the doctor. Well, I'm not calling the doctor because the doctor's a hysterical bitch and I don't want to buy half a drugstore of antibiotics just because she tells me to. That's what happened to a friend of mine recently. I've been given another doctor's phone number and I'm planning to call her today/tomorrow—but I really hope it'll all pass by itself... I am worried sick.

May 9. Rupert Murdoch has agreed to give a fund-raiser this summer for Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, the latest sign of cooperation between the conservative media mogul and the Democratic lawmaker who has often been a prime target of his newspaper and television outlets.

Cape Canaveral, Florida, May 14

Marc Ellis

[...] Wal-Mart is shopping for organic produce and the newspapers are alive with the debate over this foray. Some organic food producers are ecstatic—their market would increase dramatically; others are leery—a dumbing-down of the organic label is at hand. Of course, the ever-present threat of being co-opted. The enemy of all enemies is

May 11. In Nigeria, armed men kidnap three foreign employees of oil companies. Ninety-nine per cent of all the oil extracted in the country is controlled by foreign companies, and 130 of

now taking on board the innovation of the Left, bending its ideology to the use of the modern. What to do when your ideas, so assaulted and maligned, are then adopted by the very ones who sought to bury you? Should you be elated over the victory or cynical about the adoptee?

Hard-fought struggles and the price paid; then victory, but not to the extent that you wanted and certainly not in the form you proposed. No elevation of self for the 'victory' in the struggle. Just the opposite; the ones who struggle are more or less forgotten or, worse, honored in a way that supports the ones who fought you.

Martin Luther King, Jr.—the African-American leader who was assassinated in Memphis, or the white Martin of national holiday fame?

The Judaic—of the Bible, a narrative that traversed the desert and gave birth to the prophets, or the Constantinian variety with the plush synagogues and the local Jewish Federation leader who spends her time charging anyone who speaks truth to power with antisemitism?

The Christian—of the Gospels, a series of narratives outlining the life of a Jewish prophet who was handed over by the Jewish leadership for death because he practiced as and was a radical Jew, or the pious Jesus, white and Christian, who is venerated by those who would judge their enemy rather themselves and who do violence in the name of the Jew who refused violence?

The choice everywhere, at all times. Empire or community. The direction towards empire or community—choosing the direction of community within empire or empire within community. The two are always present; we choose the path we will follow. Imperfect. There is no perfect community

their employees have been kidnapped since the beginning of the year. Nigeria's oil reserves have been estimated at 34.5 billion barrels, but over half of the 130 million Nigerians live on less than 1 dollar a day.

or empire and no choice that is pure. Within empire, community can be pursued but not perfected. Empire taints that pursuit. Probably a good thing; pure community would be an empire too.

So, organic within Wal-Mart. Community movement within empire. The choice then is whether community is furthered by stocking the shelves of Wal-Mart, or whether community will be absorbed and countered through its very inclusion there. It may be a combination—somehow furthering both community and empire. The struggle taken to another level.

Or it could be that those who are into organic for community purposes rather than profit motives should take their produce elsewhere. Or just move on to another aspect of community building.

Those who seek community are travelers always, even when apparently settled. Like the covenant, now conveniently located in your local synagogue, viewing hours posted, periodic readings also announced. After the readings, coffee served. Or the Eucharist, also on display; Sundays, 10-12am. No appointment needed.

Is the covenant and Eucharist there at the posted times? Or are they traveling elsewhere, the outer shell retained while the essence remains outside their designated residence?

Like shells on the beach. A being lived there, yesterday or long ago, but not now. [...]

The aisles of Wal-Mart and contemporary religion. Different?

Suggestions for Wal-Mart's continuing expansion: have places of worship within their stores. Churches—denominational or just a unity church? Synagogues—I think generic here, ecumenical, with little expectation that many will show up.

Not to forget mosques—otherwise an outcry that they are being left out of the American dream. Also a Kabbalah center; suggested endorser: Madonna. Probably not New Age—Wal-Mart is too staid for that, though after organic produce, the flood gates may open.

Also on the to-do list for Wal-Mart: announcements of religious services need to be made periodically as they do in the airport. Make sure worship spaces are kept clean at all times. No loitering and eating of foods—including organic produce—in the pews or on the prayer rugs. Also no picketing of rival religious groups. No religious literature to be handed out.

Not sure: special security force for worship places, or just a greeter that is specially trained?

No poor allowed, like churches, synagogues and mosques outside of Wal-Mart. Or, if poor, they must be neat and clean. Again, no loitering: must be strictly enforced.

Decorations: keep it simple. American flag for each space. Also special needs: Israeli flag for synagogue. No other national or movement flags allowed. Recorded national anthem should be made available—American only. Not in Spanish.

If approved, banking windows need to be kept at least 50 feet from worship spaces. Otherwise, the story about the money changers and the Temple might come up. The next thing you know one of our customers will be reading from Isaiah. The entire thing can unravel. [...]

As the worshipers exit from worship, have the security/greeter wish them a good day. Beware of special holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah. Problem: Muslim holidays are difficult to remember and pronounce. Skip them. Just smile.

Cape Canaveral, Florida, May 15

Marc Ellis

[...] Wal-Mart worship. Mockery to be sure. But is Wal-Mart worship different than the ‘real’ thing in churches and synagogues across the nation? Wal-Mart worship as more authentic, or more embodied, more to the point and representative, idolatry here naked. Or—also—a possible refuge, a place of silence and gathering whose churches are not opulent and respected. Wal-Mart worship as the uncultured, redneck church of our day? For those who live on the underside of the American dream? Reversal: those who can’t reach the American dream materially shop at the store that represents the fulfillment of the American dream. Shouldn’t they and it be blessed? Still, Wal-Mart worship has no vision beyond itself. Again more honest. The churches announce a vision beyond themselves that they do not want to reach and don’t want anyone within their sight to reach for. The vision is in the prophets, somehow applied to others or banished to another date and time, or already achieved so nothing needs to be done. Sacrilege is the doing of what has been done, *for us by Jesus*. Or has been spoken by the prophets *never to be spoken again*. [...]

Kyiv, May 19

Veronica Khokhlova

Our backyard. A couple of days ago. A drunk fell off the bench. Very theatrical. I’ve been planning to write a piece called *Planet Besarabka* since 2002—but I got bogged down hopelessly in the first few paragraphs. Maybe the title’s wrong: the immensity of it all, is it really possible to squeeze everything into one piece? From my balcony, at

night, I used to watch really interesting scenes down at the playground—like a theater spectator. And I would never allow Marta to live in that room facing the playground: it'd teach her to curse before she learned how to talk.

Milan, Italy, May 21

Today someone sitting behind me on the bus started tapping rhythmically on the wheel box. A perfect, endless tapping: a concert. And he went on like that, obsessively. The others did not seem to be annoyed, but I found it almost unbearable. Just as in other circumstances, when someone on the bus—a 'nutcase', as they say—starts speaking in a loud voice, or speechifying, or talking filth, or plying people around them with questions and provocations. He was also crooning and whistling; it seemed as if he couldn't help it. He was good, he may have been a musician; or he may just have been about to explode, merely about to explode. Someone turned round to look, but just for a second. A bit of uneasiness, or fear. I was seething. In similar circumstances, I usually get off before my stop. Today I couldn't; I just couldn't wait to get home. At a certain point I was relieved to feel he stood up behind me; and saw his face. A young man, perhaps South American, perhaps thirty. With a bold stare. Before getting off, he turned round to look at the people he was leaving behind on the bus. His was a defiant look. No, perhaps he wasn't 'a nutcase'. Still, I would willingly have got off the bus not to hear him any longer... And just great weariness had kept me from doing that. What a strange thing! Running away. What from, after all?

Germana Pisa

May 19. More than five months after elections, the new Iraqi government headed by Nuri al-Maliki, a Shiite belonging to the Da'awa party, is ratified by the parliament.

From Slovakia. No Tramps

by Giorgio Mascitelli

Here

notes from the present

To my friends

Foreword

I returned to where I had been exactly one year before, to the Slovak village of Štiavnické Bane, and I found it in every single way as I had left it; in keeping with this fact, I also encountered once again those friends that I had met last year at the bus stop: three authentic faces, though undeniably marked, their rough hands clasping bottles of disgusting plonk, or beer. I don't think it was vodka or borovicka because it was six a.m. and there's a limit to everything. This year I didn't greet them on encountering them again, because we didn't even talk to each other last year, since we don't really speak that much of each other's lingos, and what's more one year ago they were engaged in a lively discussion, so they often had to wet their dry throats as they waited for the bus, while I chatted to my wife; but I was so pleased to find them all alive that I didn't doubt even for one moment that they shared my joy.

By way of a foreword

After Beckett, after Erofeev, after Bukowski (for the little'uns) you can't even sit down and guzzle your vino in peace and quiet, forgetting your secret

cares, when, before you know it, some bright spark pops up to give it symbolic meaning. But we are no tramps: we have a home or at least a spot to lie on, we live on social security, just the same as the gypsies, but they also get income support as they have a lot of kids. And that's why Beckett made tramps, and not gypsies, wait eternally. Anyway we are neither tramps nor gypsies, even if in actual fact we're the ones that brought up the story of the gypsies. Anyway here, besides not being tramps, we are the only ones who are not waiting for anything; indeed we're hoping the bus will get here quick to ferry away you know who. We may well be a social phenomenon.

Introduction

Perhaps last year there were four of them, but I don't think so, or maybe one of the three was someone else, but I recognised the other two faces. This time it was around midday when we saw each other and they were more pensive, they spoke less, but the bottles were still passing hands. Above all the guy with the skull-cap had an expression that was in its own way intelligent, and he was also not that young. I was really pleased to see him alive. I felt the need to talk to them, I felt an obscure sense of brotherhood, I felt the need to immortalise them in a story (immortalise them—humility is not my forte), but then I realised that none of this was necessary. As for these obscure brothers, I truly hope not to end up like them, and there is nothing in common between them and me, save our mother earth, but that you have even with a manager from Toronto, just to quote a figure that is particularly despicable according to the values of holy drinkers. Even the story, or at most

the subject, was already present, because just today I read in Sme, the leading Slovak daily (I read it, but then I had my wife re-translate it, because I wasn't sure that I had really understood), that in Slovakia there are between fifteen and twenty thousand bootleg distilleries compared to less than three hundred legal ones for a population of little over five million; I reckoned that's roughly about one distillery every three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, excluding new born babies, wine cellars, breweries and the Hungarians. Then I realised that it was pointless, I could only be happy that they were alive, because not even the revolution would save these people, just to name an extreme remedy that ought to save every one. I must add as an aside that I really believe in the revolution because you have to believe in something, even if with age I will become a whining little intellectual who dispenses speeches that are considered edifying, but it is one of the many destinies that the living have to face. Anyway, no matter how much you believe in the revolution, not even that can save these guys. The social scourge of alcohol will only be wiped out by the revolution, when the scourge of life has been wiped out.

Prelude

Probably we are a social phenomenon, in fact we certainly are. A shortage of social services, lack of prospects of dignified work, absence of community or class moral values. There's enough here for a news story or even a novel; that way at least the writer uses his time well and doesn't break the balls of those swigging their wine. But a socially committed novel would not be such a bad thing,

not that avant-garde stuff à la Beckett or Erofeev which doesn't interest anyone, but those stories that journalists like. If the story, be it real or fictitious, of three alcoholics from a small Slovak village were to come out in another country, we reckon that Sme would organise an encounter between the author and his victims, that way we'd be given something else to down, other than the usual klaštorné, and we'd have fun watching the faces of the mayor and those from the shop in Štiavnické Bane. Otherwise, it would be better if a manager from Toronto left us some coins as he went by, though we aren't tramps and we have social security, even if this idea has been tackled in a similar way by some guy like Brecht or Sartre. In any case the body needs alcohol, not to mention the soul.

Prolegomenon

In the revolution they wanted to include everything and its exact opposite but not everything fits; that's why, for example, if a keen philatelist were persuaded that the revolution would enable him to have a more complete collection, and he then found out that things were not that way, it would immediately be the fault of the revolution and not his own. But I say: believe in the revolution even now when it's a joke, because it's human to believe and it's better, as human beings, to believe in what is human, not because God doesn't exist (to be honest who am I to say whether God does or does not exist?), but because being defeated is part of being human. Even if not even the revolution can save these guys, even if there have been lots of deaths. This feeling of joy that I have in seeing them still alive is not

revolutionary, it has nothing to do with it, though it's not something I experience whenever I see that bastard of a Toronto manager. I want to be able to live without mistaking my personal sympathies for the universal laws of justice.

Preface

If then people, indeed citizens, who are having their drop in the morning at a bus stop that's not only covered, but with a brick wall to provide shelter from the elements, are disturbed, not even for a socially-committed work of art—although at the worst even Beckett would do, 'cause if you try hard enough you manage to understand some of it in the end—there's something to be said for those who think that literature is pointless. Such an interesting social or symbolic phenomenon ignored in such a way as to make even a drunken crow during the mating season get pissed off, and it's not as if we had asked to be taken into consideration. But it's fate that things should be this way, that we are not even tramps.

Dear drinking friends, all this fills my heart with delight in seeing you still alive and, while not wanting to be melodramatic, this was not perhaps so unlikely to happen, but neither was it to be taken so much for granted as to be a sure bet.

Baghdad, May 31

R.

It's fascinating to watch the world beyond Iraq prepare for the World Cup. I get pictures by email of people hanging flags and banners, in support of this team or that one. Oh we have flags and banners

May 27. An earthquake rocked Java, killing at least 4700 people.

too—the hole-ridden black banners all over Baghdad, announcing deaths and wakes. The flags are all of one color, usually—black, green, red, or yellow—representing a certain religious party or political group. A friend who owns a shop in Karrada had a little problem with a certain flag last week. Karrada was one of the best mercantile areas in Baghdad prior to the war. It was the area you went to when you had a list of unrelated necessities—like shoes, a potato peeler, pink nail polish and a dozen blank CDs. You were sure to find everything you needed in under an hour. After the war, SCIRI, Da’awa and other religious parties instantly opened up bureaus in the area. Shops that once displayed colorful clothes, and posters of women wearing makeup began looking more subdued. Soon, instead of pictures of the charming women advertising Dior perfume, shops began putting up pictures of Sistani [the ayatollah who is a point of reference for the Shiites], looking half-alive, shrouded in black. Or pictures of Moqtada al-Sadr [the mullah who is the leader of the Shiites’ radical wing], grim and dark, and almost certainly not smelling like Dior. This friend owns a small cosmetics shop where he sells everything from lipstick to head scarves. His apartment is located right over the shop so that when he looks down from the living room window, he can see whoever is standing at the shop door. G. inherited the shop from his father, who sold sewing materials instead of cosmetics. The shop has been in his family for nearly 20 years. Prior to the war, his wife and sister ran the shop, making the most persuasive sales duo in the history of cosmetics probably (the proof of this being a garishly colored neck scarf I bought four years ago and never took out of the closet since).

May 31. From “The New York Times”: At least 200,000 and perhaps as many as 450,000 have died as a direct result of the conflict in Darfur, according to estimates by international health and human rights organizations, though no one is sure how many of the deaths have come from combat and how many from the hunger and disease that have been caused or worsened by the war. But these days, people mostly die because they cannot get health care, clean water or enough food.

After the war, and various threats in the form of letters and broken windows, G. began running the shop personally and in addition to cosmetics, he introduced an appropriately dark line of flowing *abbayas* [long, loose cloaks] and headscarves. The last time I visited G. in his shop was two weeks ago. Since January, G.'s shop has been the center of some football (soccer) activity. His obsession with football has gotten to the point where the shop closes up two hours early so that E., the cousin and various other friends can gather for PlayStation FIFA tournaments. These tournaments are basically a group of grown men sitting around, maneuvering little digital men running around after a digital ball, screaming encouragement and insults at each other. If you walk into the shop looking to buy something during those hours, you risk being thrown out or simply told to "Just take it, take it—whatever it is. Take it and GO!". Every World Cup year, G. and his wife only half-jokingly quarrel about changing his only son's name to that of the footballer of the year. (As a sort of compromise, family and friends have all agreed to call his 14-year-old son 'Ronaldino' until the games are over.) G.'s cousin, who has lived in Canada for nearly 15 years, recently sent G. a large, colorful Brazilian flag—perfect for hanging on a shop window. He told us how he was planning to hang it right in the center and paint under it in big bold letters "VIVA BRASILIA!". E. looked dubious as G. excitedly described how he'd be changing the colors of the display—green and yellow to match the flag.

It was up for nearly two whole days before the problems began. The first hint of a problem came through G.'s neighbor. He stopped by the shop

and told G. that a black-turbaned young cleric had been walking past the shop window, when the flag attracted his attention. According to the neighbor Abu Rossul, the young cleric stopped, gazed at the flag, took note of the shop's name and location and went on his way. G. shrugged it off with the words, "Well maybe he's a fan of Brazil too...". Abu Rossul wasn't so sure, "He looked more like the 'Viva Sadr!' type to me...". A day later, G. had a visit at noon. A young black-clad cleric walked into the shop, and had a brief look around. G. tried to interest him in some lovely headscarves and *abbayas*, but he was not to be deterred from his apparent mission. He claimed to be a 'representative' from the Sadr press bureau which was a few streets away and he had a message for G.: the people at the above mentioned bureau were not happy with G.'s display. Where was his sense of national pride? Where was his sense of religion? Instead of the face of a heathen player, there were pictures of the first Sadr, or better yet, Moqtada! Why did he have a foreign flag plastered obscenely on his display window? Should he feel the need for a flag, there was the Iraqi flag to put up. Should he feel the necessity for a green flag, like the one in the display, there was the green flag of *Al il Bayt* [Family of the Prophet]... Democracy, after all, is all about having options. G. wasn't happy at all. He told the young cleric he would find a "solution" and made a peace offering of some inexpensive men's slippers and some cotton undershirts he sometimes sold. That evening, he conferred with various relatives and friends and although nearly everyone advised him to take down the flag, he insisted it should remain on display as a matter of principle. His

wife even offered to turn it into a curtain or bed sheets for him to enjoy until the games were over. He was adamant about keeping it up. Two days later, he found a rather dramatic warning letter slipped under the large aluminum outer door. In a nutshell, it declared G. and people like him ‘heathens’ and demanded he take down the flag or he would be exposing himself to danger. It takes quite a bit to shake up a guy like G., but the same day he had the flag down and the display was back to normal.

As it turns out, Moqtada has a fatwa against football (soccer). This is a translation of what he says when someone asks him for a fatwa on football and the World Cup: “In reality, my father’s position on this topic isn’t lacking... Not only my father but Sharia also prohibits such activities which keep the followers too occupied for worshiping, keep people from remembering [to worship]. *Habeebi*, the West created things that keep us from completing ourselves (perfection). What did they make us do? Run after a ball, *habeebi*... What does that mean? A man, this big, tall Muslim—running after a ball? *Habeebi*, this ‘goal’ as it is called... if you want to run, run for a noble goal. Follow the noble goals which complete you and not the ones that demean you. Run after a goal, put it in your mind, and everyone follows their own path to the goal to satisfy God. That is one thing. The second thing, which is more important, we find that the West and especially Israel, *habeebi*, the Jews—did you see them playing soccer? Did you see them playing games like Arabs play? They let us keep busy with soccer and other things and they’ve left it. Have you heard that the Israeli team, curse them, got the World Cup? Or even America?

Only other games... They've kept us occupied with them—singing, and soccer, and smoking, stuff like that, satellites used for things which are blasphemous while they occupy themselves with science etc. Why, *habeebi*? Are they better than us? No, we're better than them."

Important note: Islamic Sharia does not prohibit soccer/football or sports—it's only prohibited by the version of Sharia in Moqtada's dark little head. I wonder what he thinks of tennis, swimming and yoga... [...]

Football and the 'dream of something'

Here

notes from the present

1. Football as celebration and pleasure

Along with so many other friends, acquaintances, and strangers, we toasted, danced, howled in joy, and punched the sky when Italy won the world football championship in Spain (1982). That torrid July, Italian cities were literally invaded by a flood of people caught up in an irrepressible mood of celebration. We all abandoned ourselves to the pure pleasure of revelling in a sporting event, knowing full well that for us and many others, that's all it was. Even back then, of course, there was the uniquely Italian brand of moron, and despite the happy flourishing of red-white-and-green, I couldn't forget the strained ambiguity in

Franco Toscani

those flags and the tragic nationalism, fanaticism, idiocy and stupidity that is constantly lurking behind them, but we had no qualms about celebrating a sporting victory in a game we adored, that we found thrilling, and that we ourselves played, though at very modest levels.

Albert Camus may have been exaggerating when he wrote that everything he knew about life, he'd learned from football, but those who argue that it's idiotic to run around after a ball, and even more idiotic to get excited about other people running around after a ball, have always seemed rather superficial to me. Not surprisingly, almost none of them have ever played football. Leaving aside the fact that in Italy, it is seen as the national sport, and the beauty and importance of many other sports are unfortunately underestimated, football is nevertheless one of the richest and most complete sports from a technical, athletic, and strategic standpoint, one in which human beings employ many of their greatest powers and skills. For instance, it is common knowledge that an essential element of the game is knowing how to put yourself in the right place on the field and move surreptitiously even when not in possession of the ball, how to choose the best time to make or parry an attack, how to identify the major threats or weaknesses in your opponent and act in accordance. The best matches are almost always the ones that are most evenly balanced and bitterly contested, with the greatest uncertainty about the course of the game and its final outcome. The fascination here derives from an extremely tense struggle and an unforeseeable outcome, played out not just between the two teams, but between indi-

vidual athletes (think of Osvaldo Soriano's wonderful descriptions of the face-offs between the striker and the pair of central defenders). The struggle is also with yourself, with your own powers and limitations, with luck and with fate, with your opponents for the final victory, with your teammates to ensure the best performance possible. It does not just involve the use of physical force and athletic prowess, but intelligence, creativity, imagination, wisdom and strategy, generosity, fairness in recognising the merits and dignity of the opponent, genuine passion for the game, *genius ludi*.¹ Football—which for those who play it is a source of joy, exhilaration, exhaustion, and suffering—is also an aesthetic experience, an experience of beauty (though it is true what Peter Handke once pointed out about the beauty of football, that is, “for less fortunate souls, football may be the only encounter with aesthetics”²): grace, coordination, and harmonious movement. When experienced without fanaticism and idiocy, in an open-minded and far-sighted spirit, it is a team game whose fairly simple *rules* truly teach people to respect their opponents (whether stronger or weaker), to coexist with others, to accept their tasks and responsibilities, to cultivate a sense of both restraint and daring, to accept luck and fate, to toil and suffer, to laugh and rejoice, in short, to experience the profoundly double nature of life. Without rules, or without a certain observance of rules, you cannot play, or you play badly and sloppily, as anyone can tell you who has some experience, for instance, of the enormous difference between official games (with a referee, linesmen, etc.) and neighbourhood games among friends and acquaintances.

¹ Alessandro Dal Lago offers an incisive description of the *genius ludi* of football in *Descrizione di una battaglia. I rituali del calcio*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1990, pp. 89, which is primarily dedicated to analysing the “ritual culture” of this sport.

²Cf. Peter Handke, “Die Welt im Fussball”, in *Der Fussballfan*, Frankfurt: Syndicat, 1980.

The more rules there are, and the more they are observed, the better you play and the more fun you have. Football is a team sport in which each player has an individual role and importance, directly related to the roles and movements of other teammates and opponents.

In *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), using his characteristic language, Jean-Paul Sartre perfectly captured the balance that exists in football between individual performance and group performance, the fact that even the best individuals, the Maradonas and the Pelés, can excel and win only within the framework of good team playing: ‘Function is for every member a relation to the objective as a totality to be totalised. In the match, every common individual will, in the light of the group’s objective, effect a practical synthesis (orientation, schematic determination of possibilities, of difficulties, etc.) of the field in its present particularities (mud, perhaps, or wind, etc.); in this way, he tries to make himself generally prepared for the specific characteristics of the match. But he will realise this practical synthesis—which, ultimately, is a kind of mapping, a sort of totalising survey—not only for the group and on the basis of the group’s objective, but also on the basis of *his own* position—that is to say, in this case, of *his* function. From the moment when the real struggle begins, his individual actions (though they require initiative, daring, skill and speed, as well as discipline) no longer appear meaningful apart from those of the other members of his team (in so far, of course, as each team is also defined by the other)—not only in the abstract, in so far as each function presupposes the organisation of

all functions, but also in the very contingency of the concrete, in so far as a particular player's slip or clumsiness at a particular point strictly conditions the movement of another player (or, of all the others) and gives it a teleological meaning which can be understood by the other players (and... by the spectators)".³

Describing football as a "beautiful game" in a very stimulating conversation with football player Cristiano Lucarelli, which took place as the Italian football scandal known as *Calciopoli* was unfolding, philosopher Sergio Givone made the following observation: "I say this with some difficulty, since I almost don't believe it myself, but I think it is still a game and it has a philosophy of its own. There are many different elements that go into it, which may be the basis for its beauty and appeal: football is competition, the struggle between two teams, but it's also the struggle of one player against another; and it's play-acting, fiction, dissimulation. The player aims for his opponent, or pretends to, in order to get around him, to elude him. Everything is fiction and pretence. This element of theatre is a fundamental part of football's appeal. The fact remains that in one sense, football is a game—or something more, a yearning to play, a dream of playing that is dreamed by children and adults. And there's nothing to ridicule in that: playing—the yearning, the aspiration, the need to play—is something fundamental. At risk of philosophising out of place, why not say something that the great philosophers of the past, starting with Aristotle, have taught us? Man is born playing, he imitates, he learns, then goes on to do what he does in life, but only if he has played as a child. A child that

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, Book II, *From Groups to History*, trans. Q. Hoare, London:

doesn't play is a terribly unhappy child, but that doesn't mean we should play only as children, because games are something very basic; they aren't the imitation of anything else, they aren't primarily the symbol of something. Rather, the opposite is true: symbols and metaphors flow out of games and the pleasure of games like water from a spring. And so this pleasure is something extremely positive, that must be protected at all costs. The reality of games should not be reductively interpreted as a tool society has invented to channel violence and keep it under control. Games are also this, of course, but they are a tool that, if used to channel violence, always regenerates it. In any case, this interpretation of games—specifically, the game of football, the last great game, at least in Europe, that everyone is passionate about—fails to take into account the playful spirit that is the response to an irrepressible need”.⁴

In football, and sports in general, violence tends to gain the upper hand when people look for and construct an Enemy (with a capital E) to make up for the absence of meaning in their lives, when the need for meaning is left unsatisfied during the week, when the collapse and failure of ideologies, the lack of plans for the future and even of places to socialise (other than discos and stadiums), the fragmentation of identity, and the ethical vacuum foster only frustration and despair. So Alessandro Dal Lago is right to observe, with regard to the “ritualization” of violence seen in football stadiums (though in this book from 1990, the scholar may at times be even too indulgent towards the phenomenon), that “the ritualistic voices heard on Sunday send out a certain message about the quality

Verso, 2004, pp. 456-457.

⁴ S. Givone, C. Lucarelli, *La banalità del Moggi e l'etica nel pallone*, “MicroMega”, no. 4, June 2006, pp. 63-65.

⁵ A. Dal Lago, *Descrizione di una battaglia. I rituali del calcio*, op. cit.,

of our weekday lives”.⁵

p. 168.

2. *Football, the society of spectacle, and globalization. From football to ‘neo-football’.*

Of course, in a game where the deck is rigged, the joy disappears and it ceases to be any fun; as Marco Travaglio points out, in the *game of chance* we call football, “if there’s no suspense, no one will play anymore”.⁶ That’s how it should be, anyway, but in human society, especially in Italy, people may play even with a rigged deck, or the game with a rigged deck may be the only one allowed. In the transition/transformation from football to ‘neo-football’, from *fùtbol* to *footbiz*, this game has been gradually distorted and corrupted as a game, and has increasingly become a major element in the modern society of siren-song and spectacle that turns every thing and event into merchandise and money; economic and political interests, and conflicts of interest, have become prevalent. Guido Liguori and Antonio Smargiasse have rightly emphasised the decisive role played by mass media, and television in particular, in the transition/transformation that has taken place from the 1980s up to the beginning of the 21st century: “Television plays a leading role in constructing its own image of football, which is different from the one offered on the field. The gap is both aesthetic and temporal. Spectators who watch the game at the stadium and TV viewers who follow the same game on the screen have a very different view of the ‘same’ event. [...] the stadium is designed for spectators (who at the most can be in the tens of thousands), whereas television is designed for TV viewers (who for the most important matches can reach hundreds of millions). But TV viewers are just audience share. Com-

⁶ Conversation between M. Travaglio and G. Ferrara, *Tutti colpevoli, nessun colpevole?*, “Micro-Mega”, no. 4, June 2006,

mercial television has the inherent tendency to dilate—double, triplicate—the duration of the match with its pre- and post-game shows; and the need to spread football content out over the week, making any distinction between game time and non-game time anachronistic. For television, after all, football is a tool—the most powerful tool it has, actually—to expand the market for advertising, putting millions of people (who in the global market will become billions) in contact with the consumer goods being offered”.⁷ It is perfectly obvious, moreover, to point out the degree to which the excessive power of Fininvest-owned AC Milan in the neo-football of the 1990s laid the foundations for Silvio Berlusconi’s political success and the Berlusconiism of the following decade. In this case, football was not only changed into a business, but was even exploited for ideological purposes, turned into a tool for generating political support. The current triumph of an exploitative and calculating rationale and the ideological and political exploitation of football represent the complete corruption and distortion of the game.

In our opinion, however, one can make these observations without subscribing to the sterile arguments of a certain brand of leftist ideology (such as the positions adopted by Gerhard Vinai in the 1970s), whereby football is just a deceptive form of “physical compensation” compared to other ludic/erotic activities thought to be more positive, and merely serves the capitalist labour system, as nothing but a means of defusing the revolutionary potential of the masses. All ideologies and moralisms, imprisoned within a reductive viewpoint, prevent one from grasping the essence and the complexity of phenomena, the

Mega”, no. 4, June 2006, pp. 25-38.

⁷ G. Liguori-A. Smargiase, *Il football ucciso dal neocalcio*, “Micro-Mega”, no. 4, June 2006, pp. 138-139. Other works by the same authors include *Ciak si gioca! Calcio e tifo nel cinema italiano* (Baldini e Castoldi, Milan, 2000) and *Calcio e neocalcio. Geopolitica e prospettive del football in Italia* (manifestolibri,

rich multiplicity of reality. Claiming that football is *only* the opium of the people and a tool for taming and manipulating the masses basically means closing the door on any true understanding of the phenomenon, making it impossible to present concrete proposals and influence its internal dynamics.

in Italia (manifestolibri, Rome, 2003).

3. *A question of mores. The 'dream of something'*

One should emphasize football's charged ambivalence, which on the one hand does indeed make it seem the modern opium of the people, a phenomenon bound up in the mechanisms of the society of siren-song and spectacle and the system of total commodification; on the other, as we said before, it still retains, at least in part, the *genuine* characteristics of beauty, grace, harmony, technical prowess, athletic creativity, physical vitality and *genius ludi* that will always make it fascinating. Today there is really no way for us to escape this charged and contradictory ambivalence, so we are forced to experience it first-hand, with all the ramifications it entails for our personal identity and the form of our torn and divided subjectivity. We humans are specialized in ruining beautiful things, and this is exactly what has been happening with *Calciopoli*; we should all devote serious reflection to the events of this scandal in order to return to a more genuine vision of the sport and abandon certain anthropological vices—opportunism, cynicism, servility, dissimulation (not always “honest”, as Torquato Accetto called it), indifference, ‘making do’—that are far too deeply rooted in the history and customs of the Italian people. Will we succeed? There's reason to doubt it, because we have been accumulating too much

poison, scandal, shame, and falsehood, too much that is rotten in and out of football, too many tears and cracks in our political and institutional fabric, too much pollution, corruption, and incivility in our civil society.

The perceptive observations made in 1824 by Giacomo Leopardi in his *Discourse on the Present State of Italian Customs*, in which the great Italian poet and thinker dwelt with some bitterness on the “extinction” or “decay” of belief in ethical principles in our country, on the “uselessness” of virtue and the “definite utility” of vice, are still disconcertingly topical.⁸ Today it is essential to keep in mind the phrase with which coach Lippi arrogantly tried to brush off Zeman’s criticism of the Italian football world: “You can’t stay inside the system and criticise it at the same time”. Now we know that Zeman was right, but we are still a long way from seeing even a single sign of self-criticism or genuine contrition from the key figures in this system, which will always try to weather out temporary storms in order to impose its own implacable logic, which now basically looks at sporting events as part of a gigantic, global process of manipulation, control, and commodification of all human activities and things. In this ironclad, yet insane logic, there is literally nothing left of the game as such, least of all the pleasure of it; terms and expressions such as ethics, mores, civil conscience, respect for rules—now as necessary to life as bread—seem to have fallen out of use, because all that counts is winning (any way you can), piling up money, deceiving others, using cunning, throwing your weight around, increasing profits at all costs, producing and consuming all available resources, thinking of human

⁸ For a closer exploration of this subject, I take the liberty of referring readers to my essay *Degli usi e dei costumi. Note politiche e antropologiche sull’Italia contemporanea*, in *Sulla via della polis infranta*, ed. S. Piazza, Padova: Cleup, 2004,

beings (all human beings, from players to spectators) as human material (*Menschenmaterial*) and of the world itself as one huge resource to be exploited. This is the nihilism that blights the very concept of man and his relationship with other people, with things, with the world, and with truth. The nihilism and rigidity of what is currently the dominant system leave no room for real, viable alternatives. There is therefore some reason to give up hope that there is any possibility of radical regeneration and a new path. And many have done so, convinced that nothing will change at all, even after *Calciopoli*.

In the conversation with Cristiano Lucarelli that we cited earlier, Givone observes that “football ceases to be a game as soon as there’s someone behind the scenes exploiting it, using it for their own ends, controlling it, manipulating it, rigging it. Obviously, a game that’s been rigged is no longer a game”.⁹ It’s true: a game that’s been rigged is no longer a game, but we find ourselves, or risk finding ourselves, in the absurd and horrific situation of being unable to conceive of any alternative to rigged games, and of accepting rigged games as the only games possible. The inurement to all kinds of fraud, the lack of moral scruples, and the passive resignation to extant evil seem to have reached such a level. Perhaps we should go back to learning from amateur, youth, and informal football (which shouldn’t be idealised, however, because even this form of the sport contains seeds of the decay found in ‘real’ football), in order to recapture the sense of individual and collective adventure, the candour and enthusiasm of the game, its beauty and purity. That’s why we are all affected by the events of *Calciopoli*, and are all in risk of

azza, Padova: Cleup, 2004, pp. 161-171.

⁹ Cf. S. Givone, C. Lucarelli, *La banalità del Moggi e l’etica nel pal-*

ruin as human beings: the issue at stake involves not just football, but *ethics*, and it touches on our entire way of life. It is an entire moral and civil world—whether it is to survive, be weakened, or be shored up—that is in question here. These events affect more than a game, they affect the meaning or lack of meaning in life and civil co-existence as a whole. To us, reinventing football means, among other things, *reinventing the relationship between games and life*, granting games all their due importance, without thereby reducing all of life to a mere game. The relationship between games and life is not one of equation, but rather of osmosis, meshing, chiasm. The way we play contains an implicit reference to a certain way of life and concept of existence, and the way we lead our lives involves a certain way of playing and concept of games.

Moggi e l'etica nel pallone, op. cit., p. 63.

If anyone were to put football at the center of the world, fooling themselves into thinking it could erase or help ignore the dramas and contradictions that humanity struggles with, they would be doing serious injustice to football, by wrongly attributing it prerogatives it does not possess. No game can erase or diminish a burden of suffering that cannot be eliminated from our lives. And those who moralistically and ideologically refuse to abandon themselves—even briefly—to the pleasure of the sport, their eyes fixed only on the tragedies of humanity, deny themselves the opportunity to experience and enjoy an important ludic aspect of existence, with troubling consequences that give a sober, gloomy tinge to their own lives, their relationships with others, and their entire present and future outlook on human relations.

The 'dream of something' in question here is

football without the Italian brand of idiocy and boorishness, without the corruption and contamination that are threatening to stifle it; football conceived in harmony with other activities, spheres, and ways of existence, brought back to its origins, a game full of adventure, the pleasure experienced by children who once played matches with no time limits on neighbourhood fields around the edges of town, leaving off only when their exasperated mothers called from the balcony, admonishing them to come home. The ‘dream of something’ gives us the fruitful chance to turn our minds once again to a line by Paul Valéry, in *Le cimetière marin* (1920), which—besides offering meagre and utterly inadequate consolation—reminds us of the necessity and difficulty of responding, every day of our lives, to the question of their meaning: “Le vent se lève!... Il faut tenter de vivre!”.

World (Cup)

by Giusi Busceti

Here

notes from the present

Parking areas with traffic lights out,
crossing asphalt ring road celebrates—
from streetcar to goods yard with main gates shut
from the night bent on the sly—
that hour, how irreparable! fulminating backhands solar!
Or France, or Italy, what matters
is that all gets lost but
love that surrenders us, that

assertion that renders one to another. This or another world
cup provided that the event calls back
everyone bringing together again everyone
it shall be the only story under the vault of heaven,
and no other: this one, it's the case
of the identical moment, even if only one
shall acknowledge it, yet written in order to be
the same rendezvous on the notebook for many: how leading
friction to shed light on it so that nobody finds it hidden
nor it denies itself to anyone, so that all requests attract
and faintly light, it's impossible to bear
the torn page, let the only supper
be shared by all the people.

Waco, Texas, June 4

Marc Ellis

[...] The name of Al Gore's film about global warming—*An Inconvenient Truth*. It certainly is, perhaps the great truth of our time, along with mass dislocation and death, the great truths of our time. All truth is inconvenient, truth and inconvenient belonging together in a non-alphabetized dictionary. Truth is inconvenient because it bursts the bubble of the everyday; the routine challenged, even breaking down. Then what to do with the truth? The truth as a great opening. Also at a great cost.

The prophet as the speaker of the truth. Again, the same question: what are we to do with the prophet? Non-alphabetized dictionary—truth, prophet one after the other. Would ordinary be next? Ordinary life as one that also hides the truth, or part of it, for the sake of peace and establishing some kind of routine that enables us to carry on and for the sake of others. Self-protection and the protection of others. The truth as too glaring, invasive—too hurtful.

Also beautiful. The truth not told completely also has a beauty; the retention of human dignity even as part of our humanity is flawed.

A balance between untruth and truth, between corruption and honesty, the place between the criminal and the saint—most of us dwell in the intermediate. The prophet also, dwelling in between? Yes, the prophet is not defined by purity; the harsh judgment would be too harsh. Unbearable. That is why the prophet calls for justice first and internal assent second. Or allows that justice established is an internal assent, at least a start, almost sufficient, a way on the path of return. Practice over belief, though the combination is preferred. Practice leading to belief, belief leading to practice—practice the measurement; belief the possibility.

Thus action is the harbinger of truth. The hungry fed—without mentioning or praising God. The widow cared for, actually provided for—a commandment that is not optional or dependent on any variable, including belief or unbelief. Belief itself a wrong turn, a speculative out, a road unable to be traveled without tending toward the other in need. Personal ministering, only as the avenue that leads to social justice. It is within social justice that the personal is viewed; charity for those who are hurt in life, broken by it, in need of an embrace that, for whatever reason, was lacking. That is the Israelite foundation, the Judaic: the person within the larger social order of justice. The needs of the person illustrating the failure of justice. Compassion as leading toward or within a just social order.

The mistake of Christianity as it has come to be: charity over justice. The person in need as the path to God—somehow without the need to establish justice. An act of faith in and of itself. Salvation

through the acts of charity as a connection to God, a giving mostly from one's largesse—the path toward personal salvation. Compassion without a desire for justice as a way to God—self-centered, personal salvation, the wrong turn.

Leaves out the inconvenient truth—that personal salvation may be dependent on social injustice. How else can charity be distributed as a sign of God's love? How else can the sinner be brought to God? Personal God over the God of liberation. Charity/salvation. CharityGod. The system that produces the poor stays in place. Caring for the poor without the move toward justice: unrevolutionary forgiveness.

I remember one day in class when I first started teaching in Waco, I was speaking about justice. The class was taken aback, and a student, trying to help me out, spoke up and said that we really didn't want justice. What he meant was that justice meted out by God would be too harsh for us—every nook and cranny of our being if seen by God would be judged inadequate, corrupt, diseased. So, do we need to hide ourselves from God?

Jesus as the great cloak, shielding us—through his sacrifice—from the judgment of God. Taking our sins on his shoulders. The judgment happening through this sacrifice, and we, within him, are thus protected. Jesus as intermediary and protector. Sins forgiven through him. The judgment of God averted—accomplished; our salvation accomplished. [...]

Rome, June 5

Lucianna Argentino

Today I didn't like myself; and I didn't because I experienced the materialization within myself

of a contradiction which is typical of the human soul, that of thinking one way and behaving another, of strongly feeling and believing in certain principles and then betraying them because of a triviality. I may be too hard on myself, but I really felt uneasy about replying sharply to a woman complaining about my children's voices while I was doing my shopping in a supermarket. I'm not one of those Mums whom you can't tell anything about their own children and I never get steamed up if someone else tells them off rightly, but that woman's excessive and repeated comments really annoyed me. However, I had at least two alternatives: one was to ignore her comments, the other to appeal to her understanding and patience, pointing out the fact that they are children and they sometimes dodge the rules of grown-ups, those rules they are taught nonetheless... Hence, I experienced this attitude of mine as a negative crease, a missed chance to do good. I firmly believe in kindness as a practical form of love towards our neighbour, and I really mean our neighbour in the narrower sense of the word, that is the one we meet every day on our way. This kindness is not meant as exterior formality only, but it carries with it warmth which comes from the heart and is perceived as such by others; I would say it is that very kindness which has its roots in the Gospel. In this regard, I remember something that happened two or three months ago. It was in the evening and, after having come out of the bookshop, I had almost got in front of the railway station in Trastevere, when I saw a man fall over in front of me. Two or three people walking in the opposite direction as mine turned round to see what had happened and then carried on walking imperturbably, as if it did not concern them the least bit. I

hurried to help the old man who, since the place was not well lit, had not noticed the low pavement step and had tripped and fallen over slightly hurting himself near his eye with the rim of his glasses. At the same time, a typically Middle-Eastern-looking man stopped and put a plaster on the old man as I was kept his lighter on. A basically trivial episode which, however, triggered a train of considerations about the way we live in our world and our relationship with others. I have no intention of expressing an opinion about the people who showed indifference towards the unfortunate man; I even tried to justify them with the fact that it was dark, that there are always tramps, drunkards, drug-addicts and a variety of stragglers around the station and they may have feared he was one of them. But I also immediately thought that, if anything, such a reason was not an extenuation, but rather an aggravation for not having assisted him. And then I asked myself: if the people who did not help the old man had been nuns or priests, what effect would this have had on us? I asked myself that, because at that time laity and Christians were a much discussed question. I am perfectly aware of the fact that offering assistance to a person in trouble is not a matter of religion, but Christians embody those principles of love and solidarity which should be (the conditional slipped out) our everyday's practice. On the other hand, on being asked who is next, Jesus recounts the famous Good Samaritan Parable, and the main commandment, after that of loving God, is "you shall love your neighbour as yourself", or rather he says love one another as I have loved you: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". And yet, now a-

days Christians can no longer be recognized, nor can they be distinguished, as they are no longer apostles, let alone witnesses to the Word. This is the only thing laity can reprimand Christians for today and I realize it is no small thing, in fact I'd say it is definitely serious, not least because it makes us forget or remove the Christian roots of our culture. And so we all find it normal and are not outraged when a Ms Ravera or a Mr Luttazzi in turn, who have no idea what they are talking about, take the liberty of expressing horribly superficial and annoyingly arrogant opinions. They declare themselves atheists as if it were a sign of superiority, as if to say: you believers are just ignorant superstitious louts, while I am the one who understands everything as I have reason. Besides, that's enough of the French Revolution! Is it thanks to the French Revolution if Western adulteresses do not get stoned to death? What about John's Gospel Chapter Eight? Freedom, fraternity and equality? And the whole Gospel? That Gospel which is itself a revolution with a capital 'R'? If I did not feel well-founded distrust of 'isms', I would profess Christian integralism, by which I mean full adherence to the message of the Gospel. Being entirely within Love! On the other hand, what we are asked for in the Gospel is also to pursue common sense and action. And to do as the Good Samaritan does, that is to give water to the thirsty, feed the hungry, visit those who are alone, sick or in prison, help those in need... and then "There is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life for his friends" and He did it for both his friends and his enemies. Christ died on the Cross, that cross which is the wonderful symbol of His love and above all of His and our Resurrection. Since, in order to look at the Cross

with purity and without hypocrisy, one has to go beyond what our eyes can see, and feel it and experience it as the path and door through which we can enter that eternal Love we were created for.

Kyiv, June 5

Veronica Khokhlova

This weekend we've been busy trying to rent a summer place—ended up with a little apartment near a wonderful lake in Pushcha Vodytsya, roughly 30 km from Besarabka. Pushcha Vodytsya would have been impossible in Moscow—so much precious land (and fresh air) wasted, not used to make money, so much stuff deserted, in ruins. Parts of Pushcha remind me of those images I've seen of Pripyat/Chernobyl—and we've only been to Pushcha in sunny weather. Renting a dacha isn't such an easy thing to do; and it's even harder if you need a dacha with a phone or internet connection—part of the reason we ended up with an apartment instead of a house. We are hoping to move there next weekend.

June 5. Islamic militias have taken control of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, defeating the warlords backed by the United States.

Waco, Texas, June 5

Marc Ellis

The *New York Times* reporting on the exhuming of mass graves in Iraq: “Mr. Trimble, the leader of the mass graves team, said little he found here surprised him after a lifetime of studying violent death. ‘I believe that most human beings operate on a least-effort basis, and murderers certainly do,’ he said. ‘The men who killed all these people, came down this road, and they did what all mass murderers do—they dug deep, they killed their victims quickly, they covered them up and then

they left, as quickly as they came.” So beautifully, hauntingly written; an article that takes its place next to the sixtieth anniversary of the introduction of the bikini swim suit. This in the local paper, not the *Times*. But still, so strange the juxtaposition. And the expertise—“the leader of the mass graves teams.” An expertise of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first. A graduate program at a major university? [...]

The killing continues and the expertise grows with it; almost without reflection a line is written—“after a lifetime of studying violent death”; do we simply continue on with our morning routine? Yes, of course, we do. Can we do otherwise? It even begins to sound logical. After all, death surrounds us, those who don’t experience it read about it constantly. So death is there, mass death happening, uncovered, what else to do but expand our technical expertise into this—and exciting?—field of study. As with medicine: a new disease is found, a new expertise to cure that disease is developed.

[...] The ones in this grave—no names given or even perhaps known at this point—were simply taken out of their homes and murdered. In their nightshirts, with and without sandals. Taken away and done. Quickly, as the article said, as they all do, mass murderers that is, the job done, lunch served and on to other killings. Or back to work, perhaps a job totally unrelated to the business of mass death. After all, most people who commit these atrocities were not trained in the profession of mass death. Ordered, done, and then a willingness to continue in this field of endeavor or not. Perhaps a one-off thing. So easy, the killing, the lives gone in an instant, snuffed out, the living picking up the pieces. Or not. Living with the agony long before the experts arrive. Then the

category 'mass death' enters their lexicon. Before, it was just murder of a loved one, the loss too painful to speak about with others. Speaking about their loss to the world? Not even a thought that anyone is interested. Then the interest [...]. The experts with specialized knowledge of the scene, the type of death, when, how and all the rest. A further oblivion for the dead and for the living. What could the living add to the story that the expert does not tell? A personal narrative, a view of the exhumed person—to shed a broader sense of the tragedy that befell Iraq. Is still befalling Iraq. Will be befalling Iraq for the years to come.

Yes, of course, the entire study of mass death, the expertise now reported, comes from the Holocaust. Another picked-over subject, the mother of all atrocities, yet in so many ways the same. The people rounded up wearing the clothes they were wearing, for no reason, certainly not a reason understandable to the people who soon will be remembered forever as victims. Only as victims [...]. Used again for other, now higher values. But wait, wasn't that used before? [...] Killed precisely for higher values, the higher being in the eyes of the beholder? Like beauty, a topic much to be debated. Alongside the bikini. And the latest cars. The red carpet treatment for the victims, almost like a fashion show.

Joan Rivers, the red-carpet diva—and Jewish!—could interview the victims. A suggestion for the Holocaust and genocide museums already in place and those on the drawing boards, an endless production line, it seems. She could bring it to life, the clothes attended to as well as the personality behind the clothes. Again, personalizing the victims is crucial to their use—for other political, ideological, and cultural issues. Not to forget reli-

gious issues; they weigh heavily on how those murdered are considered. Worthy or unworthy? Like fashion, the murdered can go in and out of style, forgotten one day, remembered the next. They can even become martyrs—under certain circumstances. Again, the context and perspective is crucial. Also the power of the survivors.

Another expertise: packaging the victims as martyrs. Perhaps this expertise should find its training venue in public relations. Another graduate program. Certainly at an elite university. Again, Jewish expertise should be consulted considering the rise of a race despised, more or less, in Europe for a thousand years or more and then—boom—remembered in every capital, a must-see performance by the heirs of those who murdered Jews by day and by night. Quite recently at that. Within my father's lifetime. [...] Shall this hatch another conspiracy theory—Jews as the progenitors of genocide status opportunities? Classified sections to be developed, internet mostly, digital photos and biosketches in a dignified manner. Also watch the language. Those on the other side of mass murder, on that other planet that has not experienced it, they are quite sensitive to decorum. Show the victims while hiding aspects of them. The vulgarities of their lives and also of their deaths need to be managed, packaged in the jargon of the public relations business. [...]

In Orlando, the chance to place it on the world agenda big time. Better than the United Nations. A competition, perhaps shopping your mass death event to Disneyworld; also, for the competition, try Universal Studios, Waterworld etc. Universal Studios perhaps the best. Movie themes. *Back to the Future* Panorama. Though Disneyworld might one-up that with Mass Murder Island. Boats and

maps, perhaps a detective story, treasure-hunt motif. Find out where this mass murder happened!! And who was responsible!! Hint: be sure to leave out American culpability. Like the Holocaust museum minimizes US involvement or apathy. Also make sure, again like the Holocaust museum, that you emphasize that the Constitution and American-style democracy make such events impossible on American soil. Also that it would make it impossible anywhere—that is, if American values were in your neighborhood.

Here you can call on Thomas Friedman—yes, another Jew—and his argument that democracies never fight wars against one another, and that places that have McDonalds are safe for the refugees of mass murder that took place in—you guessed it—countries without McDonalds' restaurants. [...] Better the orange groves and the Orlando of old, warts and all, than the brave new world of mass murder experts and public relations gurus, Jewish or otherwise. They wipe history clean with the victims of history. You, whose story will never be told.

Kyiv, June 10

Veronica Khokhlova

Mishah had a ticketless ride from Moscow to Kyiv. Yes, this is possible, despite two border-crossings and all. You just pay the *provodnik* 2,000 rubles (that's something like \$70, slightly less than what you pay for first class) and you get an upper bunk in a tiny, two-bunk *provodniki's* compartment, with three beer-drinking, drunk assholes on the lower bunk, two men and a woman, also ticketless. One asshole ended up sleeping on the floor, on a huge toy rabbit that he had bought

June 7. Al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was killed along with several other people by an American air strike near Baqubah. U.S. warplanes dropped two 500-pound bombs.

June 9. An explosion on a crowded beach in the

from those poor people at one of the stations, poor people who get paid in toys they produce instead of money. Oh, and you don't get a pillow.

“Tak dazhe moldovane uzhe ne yezdyat,” said a border control woman with contempt (“Even Moldova folks [*gastarbeiters*] don't travel like this anymore”).

Mishah barely slept this night, the *provodnik*—whose nickname is Pomidor (Tomato)—didn't sleep at all, his female partner—work partner, that is, the *provodnitsa*—napped on what I first thought were a couple of chairs arranged outside their compartment, but Mishah said, “No, it's too difficult to explain the arrangement, I'll have to draw a scheme.” In the morning, the *provodnitsa* and Mishah discussed who had a worse night, he or she.

On Monday, Mishah is going back the same way, ticketless. There are no tickets because it's summer, weekend, holidays weekend in Russia, not enough trains, too many Moscow people coming over here, whatever. No cheap tickets, no expensive tickets. Trying to get tickets a week in advance is too late. An extra train they've introduced for the summer doesn't work for us because of its departure and arrival times.

Today, we hope to accomplish the move to Pushcha Vodytsya. I panic inside because even though it's 30 km from where I am now, it's a totally different world—which seems rather underdeveloped. But the air's real good. We'll see, I keep telling myself.

Gaza Strip kills eight

people, including a whole family of father, mother and three children aged between 18 months old and 10 years old. The Israeli artillery is claimed guilty. But Israel refuses any liability and even refuses to accept an international inquiry.

Casablanca, June 10

Jihane Bouziane

[...] This week I've had to travel for work to the *June 10. Three prisoners*

Moroccan countryside and drive to a small *douar* between Settat and Marrakech. [...] Departure from Casablanca at six a.m. It's the first time I've taken the highway, and there are four other people with me in the car. I think I have never felt so responsible for driving carefully before. With taxis that seem to be racing with one another, lorries that think they are the Kings of the road and careless buses, I'm scared. So I'm driving slowly, which wins me my colleagues' digs, their applauses every time I overtake, and, of course, nasty looks from drivers overtaking me. It's hotter and hotter, and I'm starting to worry about the ridiculous tan I'm getting on my forearm. We've driven past Settat long ago—we're on the side of the dam and Marrakech is not more than a hundred kilometres ahead of us—when one of my colleagues tells me to slow down: I have to turn left. Left... There's no road on the left. There's a kind of trail. I turn and drive on for ten minutes, and here's the *douar*... Some children come towards us running. They look at us as if we were from another planet. I know it's not the first time they have seen a car: it's me they're curious about most of all. I'm driving...

We get to the people we've arranged to meet. A huge house, with countless rooms. A man welcomes us on the front door and asks me if I want the car to be put in the garage. I manage to explain I don't think it's necessary. Five minutes' courtesies and my visit starts. First destination: the kitchen; some women are talking and, as they see me walk in, a smile shows on their lips. I'm in jeans and a T-shirt, they're all wearing a *gandura* [a sort of sleeveless tunic], with headscarves carelessly tied round their heads. They must be suffocating in this heat. Since I want to feel closer

commit suicide at Guantánamo. Speaking to the BBC, Colleen Graffy, American Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, has described the suicides as a "good PR move to draw attention".

June 10. Hamas fires at least 15 Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel. Two people are injured. As a reaction, a rocket fired from an Israeli helicopter kills two Hamas militiamen and injures two passers-by. About 3,000 Palestinian rockets have hit the Israeli territory since April 2001 and most of them have fallen inside the municipal borders of the town of Sderot killing 5 people in the last five years.

to them, I put on a *gandura* and a headscarf too... But it doesn't seem to work: I'm still a *mdiniya* (a town girl). Once back in the kitchen, what strikes me is the simplicity of the place. Everything's done on the floor. The mother's sitting on a tiny little chair, which can hardly be seen. The mother's a huge woman, though with incredible physical strength, as if those extra kilos were the source of her energy. The other women, much younger than her, are tidying the kitchen and getting lunch ready. She supervises them. They all give us side-long glances. The little girls smile at us every time they meet our eyes. I start speaking and the atmosphere unwinds.

The mother's never been to school. Her parents didn't want her to waste her time: she was more helpful working at home, or taking the cow to the dam... One would say that all the suffering of the world is engraved on her face. Years of hard work have left marks on her hands, and the burden of a family with seven children has dug deep lines in her feet, but she smiles as she speaks to me showing her few teeth left. Now the girls all go to school, even if her husband never stops telling them that it's useless, that they'd better help him on the small plot of land he cultivates, instead of wasting their time inside a classroom. But that her daughters should go to school is the only thing she's never relented about: she doesn't want them to become like herself and be able to do nothing but cook, look after the house and the cow and make rugs. [...] The girls following her orders have all married recently. The oldest was twenty, and risked missing the marriage train: it was hard to find her a man from the *douar* who could read, and all the others didn't want a woman who was able to count money, which would make her the keeper of the

family budget... 'Luckily' in the end she found a Moroccan who had emigrated abroad and whom she suited well. Why? Because she's left alone all year round, and in this case being able to manage that famous budget while the husband's away is a good thing.

The children are running around, and yet they should be at school. When I ask him why, the head of the family gives me a brusque answer: "It's not like in town here, there are lots of things to do at home. They waste their time at school: it's enough for them to be able to read and count, all the rest is useless". I don't have the nerve to reply but, as if to challenge him, I go and talk to some little girls looking at us from a window. They're adorable. They ask me to drive them around a bit and I immediately please them: it's my way of showing them... I don't know what... [...]

From Vietnam. Speechless glances for glimpsed words

Here

notes from the present

...we would ourselves see a new world emerge from under their pens, and we would thus learn to understand our own. **Antonio Maconi**

J.-J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Men*

Any book on Vietnam, whether a guidebook or a critical essay, inevitably deals with its ethnic minorities, the 54 official groups—classified either

according to the colours and patterns of their traditional costumes, or by their languages—which mainly live in the Northern Uplands and Central Highlands of Vietnam. Called *montagnards* (mountain dwellers) or hill tribes by Westerners, and *dan toc* (nation, ethnic group) by Vietnamese scholars, northern minorities migrated over the centuries from central China to settle in the border area between Vietnam, China, Laos and Myanmar. In the last few decades, government policies have pushed these nomadic ‘slash-and-burn’ farmers into permanent settlements in remote mountain areas; 63% of their population currently lives under the poverty line (5-10 USD per capita per month). Outsiders have long been questioning the necessity of economic development, the risk of cultural loss, the forced political promotion of a Vietnamese nation united in its diversity, thus reducing the minorities to mere subjects of observation.

Tinh Tuc, Northeastern Vietnam -December 20, 2002, 9 pm.

The mountains in Northern Vietnam are often embraced by a thick fog; a slippery coat of humidity covers the dirt road, which usually becomes paved as you reach tourist sites or provincial capitals. The clouds sometimes scatter and the sun shines on the muddy waters of terraced paddy fields; in the valley, you can see buffalos standing next to thin female shapes, bent over the water. As you travel, you do not see human beings or their traces for kilometres at a time; you cannot see their villages, as if they were always hidden on the other side of the mountain. You see narrow paths winding their way up

through deforested mountains; the eye of the would-be anthropologist (me...), who is now getting used to looking for 'something' amid the low vegetation, picks out groups of women—finally, the minorities!—their bamboo panniers on their shoulders, some full of firewood, some full of vegetables, fire and food for their sustenance.

A fascinatingly sad vision. To the Western spectator, now unused to such sights, Northern Vietnam immediately evokes the primeval conflict between Mankind and Nature, played out here to perfection: man, such a lowly being compared to the supreme Nature of the surrounding mountains; man, dominating yet still dependent on nature; Mankind completely cut off from nature, having long forgotten its significance.

Bac Lac, Northeastern Vietnam - December 21, 2002, 6:30 pm.

A few days ago, we finally met up with the minorities: 'what' we had been studying for more than a year suddenly appeared before our eyes. The first encounter gave us the irrefutable proof that they really did exist; everybody in our group was obviously euphoric. After yet another sharp turn in the road, we saw two bold youths (teenagers or adults? It's so hard to guess their age!), three children and a mule, all staring at the deserted valley. They were all dressed in dark blue, with wide fisherman's trousers and jackets; the young men also had berets, like the caps worn in Sicily. It is also hard to guess which ethnic group they belong to: our guide informed us that the men have abandoned their traditional clothes, but they were unquestionably ethnic minorities...

My first ethnographic description!
Our second encounter was definitely more fruitful: we stopped our car at the outskirts of a village, entered the houses, and I started observing everything with extreme diligence, making sketches in my notebook of all the tools hanging on the sooty bamboo walls, writing down their names, descriptions, and uses. On the third occasion we even managed to strike up a conversation. A family invited us to visit their home: I noticed the usual ancestors' altar next to the picture of the Father (or rather, the Uncle!) of the Vietnamese People, Ho Chi Minh. The household was made up of an old couple, a 65-year-old man and a 60-year-old woman; he belonged to the Tay ethnic group, whereas she was a Cao Lan. Any visible difference between them? None at all! And yet many scholars have affirmed that the difference in clothing is one of the main criteria for distinguishing between ethnic groups; for my couple, though, their 40 years together may have erased all the differences... Like many other women, her teeth were a colour between dark red and purple, nearly black; I thought it was coagulated blood, since many of the women like to pass the time by picking their gums with metal toothpicks. It turns out it is actually trau, a mixture of betel leaves and other addictive substances. But why is trau an exclusively female prerogative? The lady cleverly explained: "Men smoke, why shouldn't women be addicted to something, too?" Duly noted. Their reactions to our arrival vary greatly: curiosity, laughter, disbelief—that's how I interpret the expression—at seeing such strange beings (for a few minutes, we feel like the famous ex-

plorers of the past); some run away; some unleash angry dogs against the intruders; some are apparently willing to talk at first, yet after a while their revealing expression convinces us that the time has come to leave. After the first few days 'in the field', I feel as if everything I studied and read before my departure was completely useless: I spent a year collecting information on their traditions, history and culture, to be ready for this encounter. Now I am in their land, and I do not know how to behave, how to show respect, how to handle the long-awaited encounter with the 'Other'. Our embarrassment and shyness, as 'model' students trying to apply theories and methodologies as objectively as possible, fade away only when we give in to our instinctive curiosity and eagerness to learn, to communicate.

Anything you can say—with, about, for the minorities—sounds inevitably reductive, narrow and simplistic: an anthropological observation, eager to classify the meaning of their ancestral traditions, their material culture, their religious practices? The fascinated outlook of a traveller, impressed by the bustling markets, the jewellery, the colourful costumes, feeling like a new explorer amid the twenty-first century 'hunter-gatherers'? The perspective of someone trying to foster development, moved to pity by the naked children, their hair bleached by the weather and, most of all, by lack of protein, by the total absence of sanitary measures?

*On the way from Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu, North-western Vietnam - December 28, 2002, 1 pm.
We started seeing women; from a distance I thought they had big black turbans; as we got*

closer, we realised it was actually their hair... We got out of the car straight away, next to a small house built on the main street: all the adult women had the same 'Moira Orfei'-style hairdo [Italian circus performer and actress known for her unusual hairstyle]; they were all working on treadle sewing machines just like my grandmother's. As usual, our presence provoked considerable mirth; my anthropological attention was mistaken for romantic interest in one of the younger women; they invited us into the house, where this very girl showed us how to achieve that rather unusual hairstyle. Our guide/interpreter told us they were Hmong women, but the book we always refer to after one of these 'close encounters', contains no descriptions of these women in the chapter on the Hmong. I feel like Indiana Jones: have we just discovered a new minority group?

As behoves a would-be anthropologist, my usual scepticism prevails: it simply isn't possible that nobody has ever seen these women before! What is the meaning of their strange hairdo? Each of us starts coming up with a personal interpretation; over the last few days, my two companions and I have been developing a new anthropological theory, 'creativism', or the definitive denial that anthropology is in any way scientific. We all see the same things, we experience the same situation, yet each of us always offers a different explanation, which is always valid and 'methodologically' appropriate. This is 'creativism, or "I can interpret it however I like"! We even named this ethnic group: from now on, they are officially the Teased-Hair Hmong!

Now that we have left the village, I realize that

writing an old-fashioned 'ethnographic' diary makes no sense at all: if you want to describe the minorities, all you have to do is look at photos of them... do you really have to come here to see them? A search on the Internet will do just as well... Instead, I prefer to record my impressions, feelings, and emotions, which have such a strong influence on my perception of this world, since I'm afraid that before long I'll have forgotten them.

If you 'look' carefully, all descriptions will sound reductive, superficial, sometimes fanciful, and definitely self-referential, since they tend not to go past the stage of first encounter and are thus exclusively based on 'one-way' visions—the anthropologist observes, the traveller sees, and the harbinger of development looks—and the resulting monologue of someone who encounters, in a way that may or may not be participatory, the diversity represented by these minorities. The anthropologist scribbles in his notebook, with all the bibliographical references filed away in his head; the traveller checks whether the things written in his guidebook really exist; the advocate of development takes notes for a report to be submitted. Several close encounters, but no dialogue at all.

On the way from Hanoi to Lao Cai, Northern Vietnam - April 25, 2006, 10 pm.

I am going back north, to the minorities. Will the situation have changed during my absence? Will the houses on bamboo stilts still be there? The thatched roofs, the strong odour of damp mixed with the incense from the ancestors' altar and

the smell of the animals? What about the illegal generators along the river used to power the satellite dishes? The night train is full of travellers; I can feel their excitement as they reach the border with the Chinese superpower. The sublime fascination of the frontier, of a border that has not yet been politically defined; the excitement of 'going to see the minorities', as everybody keeps saying; they will finally see with their own eyes the women whose photos are hung in every single tourist café in Hanoi.

I think back to the gentle 'lesson' of a guidebook for "independent travellers" (why do they need to be guided and educated if they're so independent?), stressing that "treating the locals with respect" is a moral obligation. "Some travellers seem to think that the hill-tribes are running around in costumes for the benefit of photographers—this of course is not the case". The guidebook's admonishment to pay these people due respect may just be a humble reminder that respectful interaction with them is preferable to 'hilltribe-watching': after all, they are inhabitants of a region, not birds in a nature preserve.

These superficial encounters are both the cause and effect of the almost complete, egocentric lack of critical judgement that leads us to barge into other people's houses, without even asking for permission. Generally without even wondering why their conditions are so desperate, where these people come from, what their history is; we easily forget that every culture is naturally complex, convincing ourselves of their essential simplicity.

Son La, Northwestern Vietnam - December 29, 2002, 1 pm.

We are on our way back to Hanoi: only a few kilometres left, maybe 200, yet considering our usual pace it may take us as long as 9-10 hours. I'm trying to use this time to come up with an overall assessment—a professional, objective one—of the first part of this long adventure; yet only trite remarks and clichés seem to come to my mind. I literally saw all the colours of the rainbow: Black, White, Red, Green, and Flower Hmong; Red, Black, and White Thai; and so on. Human beings exotically categorised according to the colours of the rainbow: does the cowl make the monk? Aesthetically speaking, my favourite are the 'Teased-Hair' Hmong, of course, and the Red Dao: dark black trousers and jackets, decorated with refined embroidery; silver necklaces, earrings and little bells like the ones on the collars of kittens, the more you wear, the wealthier you are; large, bright red turbans covering shaved heads. As usual, I tried to ask them their ethnonym, and I got several different answers. What do they call themselves? Again, different answers: maybe they suffer from collective amnesia. After careful research, I found out that the Red Dao actually belong to the big Yao group from China; they are also called Man; among their relatives, we should not forget the Mien (Iu Mien, Kim Mun or Lanten, Biao Mon, Dzao Min, Biao Jiao Mien), the Miao (Bunu, Wunai Bunu, Younuo Bunu, Joingnai Bunu), and the Tai. Each group speaks a different language and wears different clothes: how colourful and confusing their family reunions must be!

We automatically accept the 'classification' of these people according to the colours or patterns of their clothes; we don't question for a second that their poverty is, at least partially, caused by those who have backed inadequate and deliberately, although covertly, disadvantageous development policies. We do not even call into question the consequences that an economy totally based on tourism, which also happens to favour only a very limited part of the whole region, may have on the population. Are we simply celebrating, once again, the myth of the noble or wicked savage, who is even more attractive when decked out with carnivalesque features, reduced to the category of sensual exoticism and nostalgic 'how-it-used-to-be-for-us' and is no longer?

Lao Cai, Northern Vietnam - April 28, 2006, 10 pm.

So far, this was the most interesting day among the minorities: we visited Pa Cheo, in the extreme north of Vietnam. Once we got there, my first instinctive thought was: "I'm back in no-man's-land". Who do these lands belong to? China or Vietnam? Or no one? What about the minorities? This is going to be the site of an Italian development cooperation project: conditions are indeed desperate. Naked, dirty children, with runny noses. The whole village is built out of asbestos material; the health clinic, with no doctor, turns out to have a multipurpose room: delivery room, laundry, and storeroom. A new school, still unused and locked, next to a tottering building where classes are currently held. On the blackboard, the teacher has written a description of the Alps and European geography. What is the point of describing such a

faraway world when even the neighbouring valley is hidden by clouds? To kill off dreams?

I remember a minority village I visited nearly four years ago. The village was built along the main road; when we arrived, it was completely deserted; then, in under a minute, there was a child rolling naked on the ground, asking for sweets; a mother sewing in her best 'official' dress; a man, hatchet in hand, sawing wood for the fire.

How can it be possible for even poverty to be stereotypical? That as you leave the paved road and come to villages on the hidden side of the mountain, picturesque postcard poverty gives way to real poverty? I'm tempted to scream, thinking that the echo might carry my voice to the invisible mountains, but the clouds hiding the valley would be sure to muffle my words.

The biggest risk is the loss of time and memory, confining these cultures within an unhistorical and stereotyped dimension of eternal immobility: their unstable economic conditions become chronic diseases that can be managed and controlled, but not cured. In the long run, the greatest risk is that these people, well aware of the interest they arouse in outside observers, may actively pursue their own stereotyping and cultural mummification, due to negation of the desire to see—or, even worse, the very possibility of seeing—the 'Other' as a key interlocutor in the dialogic process of developing an individual and group identity. Hence the de-contextualization of their ethnic culture: the extent of their ethnic diversity is not determined by them, but by those who observe them. The creation of a living museum, a zoo, or a botanical garden, is just one small step away.

Rome, Italy - February 2005, 1 am.

The study group on ethnic minorities met today; once again, we had a chance to look back on the research mission we organised two years ago. Over the last few weeks, we've always ended up arguing about the same topic: the globalized world threatening the cultural identity of these ethnic groups. Little by little, they are abandoning their traditional customs, leaving the mountains they were forced to live on, in hope of moving closer to the countryside, which may offer more resources and opportunities. What should be done? Should we confront, limit, oppose this natural process? Thinking about all the people (old-school anthropologists, tourists, and humanitarian workers driven by a genuine and heartfelt missionary spirit) who think that stopping time could be a valid solution to prevent the extinction of these groups, Donna and I, in thrall to our usual telepathic sense of humour, came up with the logo for a publicity campaign: a picture of a minority woman with two black circles around her eyes, like the panda in the WWF logo... we could organise some kind of telethon, with a train travelling through minority areas and trumpeting the slogan "save the minorities!" ... Another idea: we could set up an association organising long-distance 'adoptions' of entire villages, not just children... But I wonder what these people—men, women, children, old and young—really want.

Opening up to the 'Other' as a source of change and evolution for your own identity, you deliberately decide to abandon all cultural defences; you feel the need to find an interpretation, a justifica-

tion, a cognitive category to contain the diversity embodied by the 'Other'. Is it better to shut yourself off by relativistically denying any possibility of communication—since to Western eyes, these ethnic groups are 'others' within the Vietnamese culture, which is already 'other' to us? Or instead, should we go on observing these people as if they were an endangered species of plant or animal? Again, the best solution lies in the metaphor of entering a stranger's house: perhaps, after asking permission to come in, we ought to ask the people who live there how they're doing. They might answer. As for us, we have to be prepared to listen and accept their reply, whether positive or negative. This would lead us to the next step: encounter-confrontation-dialogue.

Sapa, Northern Vietnam - December 25, 10 pm. Merry Christmas. It was a wonderful day: I spent the morning in Taphin, a Hmong and Dao village. The two groups inhabit the same land, but lead completely separate lives. I chatted with a Hmong girl, who could speak very good English, but her answers seemed prompted by a young American who had joined us, as if to reassure himself that she was passing on the right information. Later in the afternoon, we finally managed to attend the Christmas Mass in the church: the idea of seeing Hmong men, women, and children gathered together in a Catholic church freaked me out a bit (didn't the book say that they were 'animists'?!?), but I was enthusiastically looking forward to it. The celebration turned out to be one of the most unforgettable moments in the trip so far: a small church, packed with people, lit with candles. Peo-

ple standing up, people lying down on the floor, people bursting out laughing as soon as they saw us; women breastfeeding, women pushing and kicking to be the first ones to receive Holy Communion. The priest spoke in Vietnamese, but the liturgical 'service' also provided a brief translation in the Hmong language. After mass, it was time for the Christmas procession: as in any other indigenous rite, it was headed by a man—not the priest!—wearing Hmong ceremonial clothes. His solemn expression as he beat time on a small drum was truly striking.

Ever since I arrived here, I've been asking myself what makes the minorities so fascinating; I've often thought that the importance of this adventure lay in the chance it gave me to intimately experience and appreciate a 'simplicity' the West has long lost. Tonight I have discovered their complexity, perhaps because we found a common cultural reference, namely the Catholic religion. Where did it come from? How did it spread among them? To what extent do they understand the Christian message? The priest proudly informed us that their faith is, in most cases, utterly heartfelt, since "they have abandoned all other religious practices". Why? Nobody could answer my question.

Once you allow the local people, the 'members of the household', to speak, you may see that behind the piles of clothes in the lively markets, there are female hands briskly weaving or spinning cotton, walking by with their children in their arms and bamboo panniers full of food on their shoulders; you might understand that aside from the loss of

their primeval indigenous culture, new, complex, and interesting cultures, derived from the fusion of neighbouring majority and minority cultures, may be developing; you may realise that these groups could assert their own ‘historical’ complexity and become the driving force behind an internal process of cultural, social and economic rebirth and development.

It would surely be much easier to recognise the deep cultural malaise hidden behind what to us is merely a sad fascination deriving from the conflict played out between Man and Nature: people showing deferential respect towards Nature through complex religious practices inherited from their ancestors; age-old cultivation techniques confirming the human ability to exploit all available natural resources at will; and lastly, the forced or induced sedentarization of historically nomadic people in a barren land with few resources, leaving them with no cultural references, no memory, orphans whose ancestors are buried in faraway lands. This is why the land, and Nature—though sometimes demanding awe and deference, other times providing sustenance—may also inspire complete indifference and neglect.

Pushcha Vodytsya, Ukraine, June 14

Veronica Khokhlova

We’ve had a 3 1/2-hour walk today, despite the rain; spent some two hours on a covered bench next to the tennis court at a sanatorium ten minutes away from us. The sanatorium used to belong to the Communist Party’s Central Committee and now belongs to the Presidential Administration. We have an arrangement that allows me to pass

June 13. President Bush used a surprise visit to Baghdad. Seated beside Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, Bush told the prime minister that he had come “to look you in the eye”, and

through the checkpoint, and I'm very happy about it, because it's safe to walk there, and the place's very clean, and there's even a cafe (even though the damned stairs are everywhere and I can't leave Marta alone outside). But the atmosphere at the sanatorium is so Soviet—so 1980s Soviet—it's making me sick. Hard to believe it's been nearly 20 years already; hard to believe we ever had the Orange Revolution or other such stuff. [...]

declared that "we'll keep our commitment. The fate of the Iraqi people is in their hands." Later, in a session with U.S. soldiers, he told that "your sacrifice is noble. I truly believe the work that you are doing is laying the foundations of peace for generations to come."

Waco, Texas, June 15

Marc Ellis

Morning—early, up before dawn. The morning papers bring the news of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Poland. Speaking in Italian, the German language still too offensive for Polish ears.

June 15. The number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq has reached 2,500, the Pentagon said.

The Poles, along with the Russians, the great sufferers of World War II—and, of course, the Jews, three million or so of them Poles. But never referred to as such—by Jews. Also the Poles, keeping them separate. So the division keeps on; the Hitler Youth Pope traveling with a sense of diplomacy and mission.

The mission: to honor the previous Pope—in his mind the great one and perhaps so—and to rally the faithful. The faithful here in great numbers. Also, abortion and contraception in great numbers. Contradiction?

The issue in America: priests as molesters. In Poland: priests as Communist informants. This occasioned the Pope's comment: "We must guard against the arrogant claim of setting ourselves up to judge earlier generations, who lived in different times and different circumstances. Humble sincerity is needed in order not to deny the sins of the past, and at the same time, not to indulge in false

accusations in the absence of real evidence.” [...] Time and context overriding. Interesting that the truth is eternal; everything else is context. The truth that cannot be touched by history; history does not touch eternity. The splendor of truth; history as fallen.

Contracting eternity; a negotiated settlement between eternity and history, the boundaries fixed in advance. Judge contraception; be easy on Auschwitz. Contraception somehow linked with eternity. Auschwitz as the fall of history. Sadness, yes: be humble before the past.

Lest we understand the connection between eternity systems and history. The victims of history riding along the routes that the Pope travels, the Popemobile shadowed by another vehicle—the cattle cars bringing their victims from all over Europe as the Vatican stood silent.

The nightly newscast: the Pope’s vehicle side by side with rolling trains of the Nazi era. I see the trains. I hear them too. Do you? [...]

The Pope will be traveling to Auschwitz. What if the Pope had traveled there *then*? Giving up everything, even his life, as a healing of the history of Jews and Christians. If the Pope had gone then he wouldn’t need to be talking now, as if the reality was only contextual, horrible to be sure, but not to be judged too harshly—in the absence of real evidence? [...]

History is patted down, mugged and left in the back alley, the place where the Popemobile does not travel, out of sight, the trains heard faintly in the distance. Is the faith too difficult with the trains, the trains of every time and place, in the foreground? In the trains where history and eternity collide. [...] The memory of Auschwitz awaits the humbling of eternity. [...]

This place is so quiet during the week, especially when it's as rainy as today, but on weekends crowds arrive to make *shashlyk* [caucasian-style skewered lamb] and swim in the lake, and I really wish we knew how to make good *shashlyk*, too, because the smell of dozens of *shashlyks* that fills the air on weekends is just totally and unbearably wonderful. Maybe we'll figure it out before the summer's end. All these people at the lake are from Kyiv, and I may even know some of them, but it doesn't feel so when we walk in the forest on weekends: it feels as if we're hundreds of miles away from Kyiv.

From Thailand. A Couple of Days in Mer Awng

Here

notes from the present

Someone always stops along the road to offer me a ride. In some ways it's like living in small town America, circa 1950. There is a helpful, friendly atmosphere. Sometimes it is someone from my village where near twenty percent of the population is family, direct or extended. I may not know them but they all know me, Dang's husband.

Ken Klein

Our village sits five kilometers off highway 1, the main north-south highway that cuts through Central Thailand connecting Bangkok with Chiang Mai.

After I make my way out to the highway, it is 35 kilometers down the road to Tak, our nearest city and the provincial capital, and like I said, someone always stops and offers me a ride.

It could be our local bus that ferries people to the market and back or someone who has seen me out walking. The tour buses that ply south from Chiang Mai will sometimes stop for me too; a chance to pick up an extra 30 baht on their way. It might be a car driven by a total stranger wanting to practice their English and sometimes it will be a passing acquaintance. Today, it is Hans, the watermelon-shaped German with the broad smile who lives up near Bhumibol Dam.

Motorcycles and highways are not a combination of circumstances that I seek out but here was an opportunity in front of me. Hans, in our brief encounters in Tak, always seemed a pleasant fellow, more Schultz than Colonel Klink. I liked him even though we barely had a word of language in common. And the idea of riding into town with him seemed a nice chance to further a relationship that had so far been nothing more than passing smiles that said, "You live here, I live here too. Wow."

Errors of judgment are part of our daily routine. They rarely matter; just an occasional forgetting that sometimes our actions have consequences. The makeshift trailer on the back of Han's motorcycle appeared to add size and stability to the contraption, like a side car or a stabilizer package that would prevent tipping. And besides, Germans, machines, stability—what could be wrong?—and he was the first to stop. That had always been the determining factor in the past. The idea of a mistake in judgment didn't enter the brief equation until later. It looked like fun.

I swung my leg over the trailer hitch as I mounted the back of the motorcycle but did not fully clear the connecting rod, scratching my leg inside the knee; a small mistake in judgment right there. I wasn't even on the bike and blood was trickling down my leg.

Hans smiled and we were off. It's not easy to understand Hans when he speaks. He has a few words of Thai and maybe an equal salting of English that he peppers his native language with; all spoken in an accent so heavy that it is difficult to discern which words might not be German. The unsorted mixture spoken from the front of the motorcycle is far beyond comprehension. The words blow past enjoying the liberation of their moment in the wind. I made out what sounded to be that the motorcycle was old but a great running machine.

The trailer behind me held a cage with three Rottweiler puppies that he was going to sell in the market. With little momentum, we labored up the first hill and I noted what looked to be the entrance to a Buddhist Temple tucked off the highway. I had never seen it before. I decided to spend my time noticing things, something that motorcycle riders everywhere praise about the experience. It might have been poor judgment to embark in the first place but once you are aboard, you might as well get the most from the experience.

As we passed the crest of the first hill and began heading downward, I felt a wind. The trailer behind me shifted slightly left, then right, then left, then right, the arcs growing increasingly larger. "Acchh, whoo-aa," exhaled Hans as he slowed and steadied our suddenly unstable means of transport. A large truck whizzed past. The word 'jackknife' appeared in my thoughts. Neither one of us had helmets. The

concept of waiting for the bus now seemed a far more rational choice. The realization that the trailer was a destabilizing appendage brought apprehension. I could envision my head cracking like an egg on the pavement all due to a momentary mistake in judgment.

As coincidence would have it, my wife would call me later that afternoon. I was in Tak, but she and her sisters had found a Buddhist Hermitage in the jungle, on a mountain. It was the same entryway that I had noticed in passing. She said it was very peaceful. I told her I wanted to see it too and the following afternoon she would guide me there.

Boarding our own small 100cc Honda motorcycle, we crossed the highway and proceeded not more than a kilometer south. We turned down the same small road that I had noted a day earlier with Hans. We followed a choppy, somewhat paved road and made a left turn at a sandy dirt road. We continued on briefly before making another left turn amongst randomly scattered boulders. We parked the bike at a shed and continued on foot through a passageway of large, scattered, near circular-shaped rocks that looked like giant Dinosaur eggs. The entire area took on a look of the American Southwest combined with a Thai jungle/woodland. It had a secluded, impenetrable aura reminiscent of what I imagined from movie images that Hole-in-the-Wall might have looked like during the days of Butch and Sundance.

A pavilion was lodged amongst the randomly scattered boulders in a small clearing. It had four posts and a considerable cement area covered with a tin roof about thirty feet high. Across the front was a platform that ran the entire twenty-foot width of the

somewhat makeshift temple. On the first level were cushions reserved for the monks. On the second level were carved animals and incense, gifts and donations. On the third platform were three larger-than-life-sized golden Buddha statues. The largest was in the center and its top neared the peak of the thirty foot roof.

There were brightly colored banners and flags hung about. The décor was bright but tasteful, well balanced. It was obvious that thought and planning had gone into the positioning of everything. In the lengthy pavilion, off to the side a monk was reclined in repose. My wife presented him with gifts of food and drink when he noted our presence.

The monk was from our village and welcomed our company. He encouraged us to sit and talk with him and enjoy the peaceful surroundings. I asked permission to wander the grounds, fascinated by the pathways that led through the boulders that were not evident as Hans and I had passed on the highway the previous day.

Hans was a capable driver. He had stayed on the shoulder of the road as much as possible. He did a good job of avoiding the bumps in the pavement that would swing the trailer left then right, left then right, as I watched and he slowed the motorcycle so that the arcs grew smaller as opposed to larger. A tour bus would pass and once more the trailer would swivel from the enormous gust of wind. “Acchhh whooo-a,” Hans would exclaim but then always seemed to steady our ride.

The distant mountains were lovely. Beyond them lies the border to Burma. The fields that led to the mountains were green and lush. A giant Buddha sat on a platform. Stairs led up to the Buddha. The

railing was a giant Dragon wrapped around the Buddha. All was gold and glimmering in the brilliant sun that was burning my legs. The people who passed on the bus most likely would only catch a glimpse of the Buddha. They would not smell the fresh air; they would not hear Hans call out in anxiety, “Acchhhh, whooo-a,” as I could feel the arcs grow larger and envision myself in slow motion being catapulted through the air, a projectile in an arc.

The road was far more hilly than it ever appeared in passing before. Buses, even cars, conquered these waves with such ease that the rolling nature of the landscape had previously seemed barely noticeable. I wondered how much of our lives had we built vehicles for to make the hills barely noticeable. From washing machines to nine-to-five jobs, we have programmed ourselves for regularity, a vain attempt to even out the bumpy road that life certainly holds. And why not? There is nothing wrong with boarding a huge bus if the alternative might be enduring the trepidation of a cracked skull. Some experiences just aren't worth it.

I noted the 20 kilometer to Tak sign. We were not quite halfway there. My leg burned from the cut and my rump had been bounced around enough that I was getting saddle sore. The seven a.m. bus from Chiang Mai passes through Mer Awng at about ten o'clock. They have stopped for me a couple of times. The driver knows me as well as the bus hostess. Surely they would have seen me and stopped if I remained at the small *sala* on the side of the road. They were more than likely one of the buses that whizzed past us on the highway. “Acchhhh, whoo-a,” Hans exhaled. “Heh heh heh,” I heard him laugh.

After wandering the grounds of 'Hole-in-the-Wall temple', as I would come to call it, I too sat and spoke with the orange-robed monk. The stubble of gray hair gave him a look of wisdom though his age appeared to be in his forties. His arms had a Popeye bulge at the muscle. His calves were powerful. Sitting on his legs, he could bend backwards at the waist until his head touched the ground behind him.

"This is not my body," he told me in heavily accented English. "This body just come to me," he continued. "I have this body because father and mother are fucking." He didn't smile. He was explaining essence to me. "I am inside me, I am my breath."

We admired the beauty of the surroundings together and then he brought us to the altar. He reached over and found a small baby-food-sized jar with a screw on lid. There were small white fragments inside that looked like tiny pearl-like stones. He told us that they were bone fragments of Buddha; that they are as old as the Thai calendar, over 2500 years. They looked more like a faux pearl plastic. He told us that sometimes at night the grounds glow as if they had swallowed a star.

There are only a handful of known Buddha relics. These fragments are in museums. The Buddha was cremated and only a couple of teeth exist, one claim from Sri Lanka holds that there is a tooth in a museum in Kandy. Beijing claims a bone fragment. Shwe Dagon Temple in Rangoon re-discovered a hair follicle in 1956. A soapstone casket remains in the Indian State of Bihar. Could there also be bone fragments in a baby food jar in the woods near my village in Central Thailand?

My woods in America would sometimes glow as

if it were daytime in the middle of the night when the moon was reflecting light. However, I wanted to witness this. If it were true, then maybe it would provide me with a certain tangible proof to the questions in life that disturb me. I know there is more than meets the eye but maybe this would be a burning bush of sorts. I want visible proof before I smash my head like an egg due to some mistake of judgment like getting on the back of Hans' motorcycle.

As we approached town there seemed to be more buses and trucks that whined and whizzed past. "Acchhh, whoo-a, heh, heh, heh." Hans would call out now, laughing more frequently and euphorically at the near successful completion of our journey. Was it just transportation for him or was there some special life-affirming joy in risking his neck on the highway? We turned onto a side road that would take us into the market. As pedestrian and in-town traffic increased, he seemed to speed up where I thought he might slow down. We were whipping our way through town like maniacs let loose from an asylum. He really was crazy. "Heh, heh, heh," he laughed.

And as I sat meditating at the Hole-in-the-Wall Hermitage, a mantra that had probably never been used before entered my head and helped me to corral my roving mind and bring my concentration back to my breathing.

"Acchhh, whoo-aa-heh heh heh," I repeated over and over again. And it seemed this odd internal chant was working. What is the use of a mantra other than to focus on the nothingness? Do the words matter at all if the result is that it gives our overactive brains a chance to rest?

“Acchhh who aa heh heh heh,” I chanted to myself.

“Acchhh who aa heh heh heh.”

There was a nice rhythm to it. I was becoming very relaxed.

Breath in-out-in-out.

Acchhh who aa heh heh heh.

The monk walked past. I thought he enjoyed the fact that I came and meditated. No. Forget the ego.

Concentrate on my breath. Not that the monk was in the vicinity; not that he talked about his parents fucking.

In. Out. In. Out.

Acchhh who aa heh heh heh.

Achhh who aa heh heh heh.

Oh no. *My* parents were fucking too?

Heh heh heh.

Pushcha Vodytsya, Ukraine, June 22

Veronica Khokhlova

[...] Part of a ruin is visible from our kitchen window—but there’s another, inhabited, building that separates us from it; otherwise, if we were closer to it, I wouldn’t have agreed to spend my summer here. There’re many buildings like this everywhere in this part of the world, and each one has many human stories attached to it, and I’ve realized it only now, after our landlady had told me hers. She was supposed to get a small apartment in that building. She has worked for the sanatorium for more than 20 years now, and the building was being built for the sanatorium employees. Several directors have changed since the Soviet Union collapsed, she said, but none is really interested to find the money to finish the construction. She’s lucky her sanatorium is still functioning. Most seem to have been deserted.

June 16. From the United Nations State of the World’s Cities 2006-07 report: in 2007 the world population living in inner cities will outnumber that of rural areas. In Africa, where the pace of urbanization is twice as fast as that known in the Western world during the industrial revolution, the countryside is not deserted because farming machines expel manpower or to look for better jobs, but to escape from famine, natural disasters and wars. 61 per cent of Africans and a billion

It kind of makes me dizzy to think of it: one day, you're the lucky one, with the new apartment looming not on the horizon but almost next door—very lucky, unlike many others. Then you wake up in a different country, and for the next decade you keep waking up with the unfinished building slowly turning into a ruin right outside your window. And your apartment is in that building, never to be yours.

*people across Africa,
Latin America and Asia
now live in bidonvilles.*

There're two rooms here, it's a very damp place, but in general it's okay, considering its gorgeous location. There used to be four of them living here, but their daughter has moved out. Now it's the landlady, her husband and their 12-year-old son. And some 20 years ago, when the landlady had just begun working here, the apartment belonged to an old woman, and the landlady and her daughter (and, possibly, her husband) lived in the room Marta and I are in now, the smaller one (the other room is the TV room). The landlady was very nice to the old woman, and the old woman was very kind to her. She used to take the landlady's four-year-old daughter for walks, despite being almost blind: "Put on that red dress, then I'll be able to see you," she used to tell the landlady's daughter. When the old woman died, she left the apartment to the landlady, not to her own son and his wife. They have a dacha, by the way. They are at their dacha now, for the whole time we are renting their apartment and using it as our dacha.

There's some unfinished construction at the sanatorium, too: right next to the indoor swimming pool, a nearly-finished brick building that will never be finished. It was supposed to be a gym, I guess—a school-type gym with huge windows. The ruin is very ugly, and it depresses me a lot—mainly because it reminds me of Beslan, of the

school gym there and what they turned it into, and when I think of Beslan now, in my head there're the TV and photo pictures of the gym there, the ones that were broadcast and published. [...]

Pushcha Vodytsya, Ukraine, July 6

Veronica Khokhlova

Putin's internet conference will begin in less than half an hour. There are 116,228 questions to him now, and the most voted for will probably be passed on to him. I, along with four other people, voted for this question, from a 40-year-old woman named Rada: "Dear V.V. In the spring of 2004 we decided to return to our Motherland, to Beslan, after living 'abroad' for six years. We sent our daughter to school, found a job. Several months later, Beslan happened. Our daughter was in a different school, thank God. We left again. If you were us, would you have stayed?"

Karkur, Israel, July 10

Liza Rosenberg

[...] What the hell is happening here? When I left Israel for our visit to the US, I left a country that was relatively calm—grumbling about our next door neighbors, but not really doing anything to harm the status quo. Just one month later, and I find I'm living in a country gripped with drama and a fresh round of tragedies, whether it be the violent destruction of a family on a beach in Gaza under questionable circumstances, the loss of a young Israeli settler at the hands of terrorists, or the continuing saga of a kidnapped soldier. Life has suddenly become very intense, and it feels as though we are standing on the edge of an abyss

June 25. Eight Palestinian militants in Gaza, including members of Hamas, emerged from a secret tunnel dug 300 yards into Israel, killed two soldiers, wounded three and kidnapped another. They demanded the release of Palestinian women and minors from Israeli jails in exchange for the soldier. There are nearly 9,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails, among

with at least one foot on a banana peel. I followed the story of the Gaza beach incident along with its predictable round of accusations and denials with distant interest. I'm not sure that we'll ever know who the perpetrators were, and to be honest, I'm not sure whose version to believe. Unsurprisingly, this episode was widely discussed in the English-language Israeli blogosphere, and also unsurprisingly, I found myself utterly disgusted by the words and actions of a number of bloggers and commenters. I was shocked by the blinding hatred that does not even allow some people to show sympathy and sadness for a little girl who lost her family, and indeed, harshly and often rudely chastises those who do. What the hell is wrong with you people? For heaven's sake, you're not being asked to race across the border and jump into a big love orgy with the neighbors! By either refusing to even acknowledge this little girl's loss or by making pathetic attempts to justify or minimize her loss in the face of losses on the Israeli side, you are simply showing an incredible lack of humanity, and frankly, it's not a terribly attractive character trait. As for attacking those bloggers who chose not to accept the official Israeli version of events, well, you all just need to relax. Step back and take a deep breath. The beauty of our little democracy is that you don't always have to support the government or believe what they say, and to be honest, it wouldn't exactly rock my world to find out that a serious Israeli cover-up was put into play here in order to avoid taking responsibility for this tragedy. [...]

Gaza. My thoughts are kind of hazy on the subject. On the one hand, the Palestinians have a government that sanctions—no, embraces—terror in all of its forms, whether it be kidnapping, murder, or

them 95 women and 313 people under age 18.

Responding to the abduction, Israeli forces arrested one-third of the Hamas-led Palestinian Cabinet and twenty lawmakers, and Israeli fighter jets knocked out electricity and water supplies for most of the 1.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip.

June 26. Thanks to a donation made by Warren Edward Buffett—the second richest man in the world—of a huge part of his assets, the Bill & Melissa Gates Foundation, which operates in 100 countries all over the world fighting against tuberculosis, malaria and Aids and spreading vaccinations, has reached a 60-billion-dollar budget. The United Nations' budget is 20 billion dollars.

July 2. Presidential elections in Mexico. The conservative Felipe Calderón has defeated his leftist opponent Andres Manuel López Obrador by a slim margin of 243,000 votes out of 41 million cast.

the firing of rockets into Israel. On the other hand, the humanitarian crisis continues to grow, and innocent Palestinian civilians are being injured and killed, pawns in a most dangerous game. Clearly, something must be done, but what? At what point do actions cross the line from legitimate to excessive? I'm not sure where the line is, but I do believe it's been crossed. I don't presume to know how to handle the current situation (and it appears to be that I'm in the majority on that one), but bombing and scaring the hell out of a civilian population that already has enough problems of its own even without our involvement doesn't seem like the right way to go.

Casablanca, July 11

Last Friday I decided to go to the hairdresser's. I usually go to a *nasraniya* which is twice as expensive as other ones, but this time, having quelled my snobbery, I decide to go to what could be called a neighbourhood hairdresser's, in other words, a cheaper one. As soon as I step inside, a blast of hot air mixed to a smell of sweat and cigarettes assails me. [...] I sit on a chair near the door to be able to breathe, and watch the scene: some girls are having their hair straightened, some others are having it dyed... blonde. In short, I'm in the temple of the blond-brunettes. [...] After having ransacked some torn glossy magazines from the 90s, I realize that the hairdressers are all men. Just look at that!... The girl who's just finished is putting her veil back on... Well, religion's had to withdraw on the veil matter at the hairdresser's... The heat's more and more suffocating. At one point two young blondes (originally bru-

July 5. The death toll from the latest attempt by up to 70 African migrants to storm into the Spanish enclave of Melilla in North Africa has risen to three. The migrants rushed a 20-foot fence in the first mass attempt to enter Spain's African enclaves since October, when six men were shot dead by Moroccan troops.

Jihane Bouziane

July 10. Shamil Basayev, the Chechen rebel who organized the deadliest terrorist attacks against Russia, was killed in an explosion. He claimed responsibility for attacks that killed hundreds, many of them civilian hostages. They included the seizure of a hospital in Budyonovsk, in southern Russia, in 1995, a theater in Moscow in 2002 and, most notoriously, a school in Beslan in 2004, where 331 people died, more than half of them schoolchildren.

nettes) turn up, their black eyebrows badly-drawn with a pencil, one in a *djellaba* with gilding on the seams, the other in a bon-bon pink tracksuit and golden-heeled sandals. They kiss everyone, and one of them takes out a packet of Marlboro Hamra and says she's been invited by the Saoudi of Dar Bouazza [on the Atlantic coast, near Casablanca] and her hair must be as straight as ever. She's happy because since she got married she hasn't had to worry either about the rent or about her parents, whom she has to send money to. Since I got back from Egypt, I have realized that this kind of girls/women are everywhere now. In a seizure of disgust, I decide to stifle my calculating side and walk briskly to the *nasraniya* that costs a bomb. As I push the door, the cool air-conditioning relieves me. The owner comes towards me and shows me to a chair where I can wait for my turn. "Just a quarter of an hour and Tima will have finished. In the meanwhile, here are some magazines. You look tired... a nice cup of coffee?" Time flies as I read the latest gossip. Next to me an elderly woman wearing a beautiful *djellaba* smiles at me and says: "You remind me of my granddaughter; she's gone to France to pursue her studies". I smile back. Behind me a man's having his hair cut by the *nasraniya* and, at the same time, a beautician is doing his hands. A man at a ladies' hairdresser's... When will we get an underground in Casablanca?

July 11. Seven bombs hit Bombay's commuter rail network during rush hour, killing 183 people and wounding more than 700.

Karkur, Israel, July 13

Liza Rosenberg

"Due to the security situation, all trains heading north will terminate in Acco. No trains will travel to Nahariya under orders from the Israel Police. The Nahariya train station has been closed. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause."

July 12. Beirut, Lebanon. Hezbollah militants captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid, and dozens of Israeli troops crossed

Granted, this announcement doesn't affect me, as I am traveling south to Tel Aviv. That is, it doesn't directly affect me. In a greater sense, it affects all of us here in Israel, a sign of the times, so to speak. The situation is spiraling out of control at a frightening pace, and I feel like I just don't know what to do with myself right now. Yesterday it was a series of attacks on the Northern border that left seven Israeli soldiers dead and two kidnapped into Lebanon. This morning a katyusha rocket slammed into Nahariya, killing one woman in her home and injuring tens of other people. Katyushas also hit near Mt. Meron. Israel has retaliated by hitting the international airport in Beirut and Hezbollah's television station. Who knows what will happen next. Life is suddenly worse than it was a few days ago, and my pacifist persona has been abruptly shunted aside as I decide that nothing would delight me more than to see that arrogant smirk wiped off the face of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, preferably by an IDF explosives expert. I think of the bloggers across the Arab blogosphere who have afforded me the privilege of making their acquaintance, exchanging comments and emails as we work together to break down barriers, barriers put in place by those whose greatest fear is the discovery that we are all merely people and not the monsters they make us out to be. We may not always agree, but there is both a mutual respect and curiosity that we have chosen to embrace. Despite the actions of governments and organizations in our countries, we are trying hard to make our neighborhood a better place. Now, as I sit here on this train heading south, I can't help but wonder, is it all for naught? It is so easy to forget the big picture as we focus on the relationships, the bridges being built. We share the same interests, the same

the frontier with warplanes, tanks and gunboats to hunt for the captives. Three Israeli soldiers also were killed in the raid.

tastes in food (who would have thought that sushi is so popular throughout the Middle East?), similar musical tastes. Thanks to these bloggers, I have learned about life in Jordan, in Lebanon, in Egypt, and so on. Never before have I been in a position to see a trip to Damascus as something normal, or to discover the excitement and beauty of Beirut. Fantasy trips between Tel Aviv and Beirut have been planned, and we eagerly drink in each others' words as we enjoy getting to know one another. It's almost like a drug, and it's so easy to become addicted, as we get sucked into a virtual world where disagreements still exist, yet borders are there to be traversed and not fortified. Then suddenly, reality comes crashing down as those with the real power make their presence felt through violence and destruction, and you wonder if your dreams of normalcy are only childish visions that will never come to pass. Are we being foolish? Is our bridge-building mere folly, a way to pass the time while allowing ourselves to think that we can somehow make a difference? I have no doubt that for the most part, we are all quite sincere in our quest, but while the perfect sunny skies of summer in the Middle East are tainted with falling rockets, and fresh graves are dug in the cracked, brown earth, I cannot help but feel that we are all very small and insignificant as the Nasrallahs of the world show us who is really controlling the game of life.

Durham, North Carolina, July 14

Laila El-Haddad

Things are bad in Gaza. Very bad. Not to mention, of course, in Lebanon, where my husband Yassine's family lives, in the Wavel refugee camp in Baalbeck, a Hezbollah stronghold. They, of course, along

with all of Lebanon, are blockaded by air and sea, so Yassine has sort of become a double refugee now: he can go back neither to Palestine, nor to Lebanon. It brings back very bad memories for him, having grown up during the civil war there, and narrowly escaping mass slaughter at the hands of Syrian-backed, Israeli-advised Phalangists in the Tel Zaatar camp, where his family originally lived, and where his uncle went missing. Of course, what's happening in Lebanon provides some uncertain relief for Gaza residents, where 82 Palestinians have been killed in the past 12 days, 22 of them children. I was finally able to reach my aunt [...]. She was dazed and anxious, but had her wits about her. They had not gotten electricity in 24 hours when I spoke to her; people have been standing in long lines to purchase candles, and of course, Rafah Crossing is still closed; eight people have died waiting to get home. Egypt, following Israeli orders, is refusing to open the gates. The nights are turning into days, and days into nights, as the sonic booming shocks them awake, shattering windows and terrorizing the population. The stress is taking its toll, but to quote my aunt, though they are not living with ease, they are living with resolve. Medicines are also running dangerously low. And to add to the misery, Israeli tanks have blockaded northern Gaza, where my aunt lives, and where our house is, from southern Gaza, where my 84-year-old grandmother lives on her own. I think of them every day. I still cringe when I see news helicopters; or fireworks; or thunder; today we had a thunderstorm, and the thunder was so loud it scared Yousuf, who thought it was gunfire and shelling, as I tried to assure him he was safe. But I wondered, inside of myself, does safe have an address?

The Tel al-Zaatar massacre took place on August 12, 1976. The camp was inhabited by some 20,000 Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Many hundreds of them were killed. The Phalangists were the main Christian militia in Lebanon.

[...] Thanks to yesterday morning's direct hit on the train garage in Haifa, the train schedule is completely out of whack. Last night I waited more than a half-hour for a train that would take me home. It seems that there are no longer express trains—only trains that stop at every station, and they don't seem to be running on time either. The lines have changed, the schedules are non-existent. There's no public transportation in the north, which probably doesn't make too much of a difference for the people living there, given that they are all shut up in their shelters. My sister-in-law lives in Haifa with her family, and they spent yesterday in the shelter at her workplace, with the kids sleeping in their apartment's safe room every night. I heard on the news this morning that Katyushas hit the area around Afula last night. They are inching closer to our home, though still far enough away that we haven't begun thinking about sleeping in our safe room, which is currently our home office. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was scared, scared that they will start firing missiles at our town as well. I find myself wondering whether or not the woman who runs my son's daycare has a plan of action, and I wonder where my husband will take cover near his workplace. Should we think about spending time with friends and family scattered around the south? I have fleeting thoughts about taking my son to the US for a while if things continue to get worse. I'd rather be considered a coward and a traitor than put my son's life at stake in order to prove a point, to show that I can stand defiantly in the face of danger. If before this mess began we were a country of news junkies,

July 16. Lebanese guerillas fired a relentless barrage of rockets into the northern Israeli city of Haifa, killing eight people at a train station. Soon after the Haifa attack, Israeli air strikes reduced entire apartment buildings to rubble and knocked out electricity in swaths of the Lebanese capital.

it has now turned into an epidemic. Everyone on the train (which is now totally packed—standing room only) is either reading the news or talking about it. It permeates every aspect of our lives and there is no escape. I have a newspaper in my bag that I picked up in the station, a free newspaper put out for train commuters with morning and evening editions. Nearly every story deals with a different aspect of ‘the situation’, and those that don’t are equally depressing. I scanned it quickly, turning pages impatiently while looking for the Sudoku puzzle, the only bit of content that would bring me any joy. [...]

Casablanca, July 21

Jihane Bouziane

I’m thinking of my Lebanese friends, of what they tell me about their country. I can’t imagine what’s happening to them. I know there’s nothing I can do; neither I, nor you can do anything, nor can anyone else, after all. I’m not able to analyze what’s happening. I only know that what’s happening is unfair, that what’s happening isn’t normal. People are dying without knowing why, without anyone really knowing why, not even those killing them. Our history books at school told us about *crucial* decisions made after the Second World War, about the setting-up of the UN. I knew history books told us lies, but not to such an extent. Some have taken to the streets to demonstrate against cartoons. Nobody’s is doing anything for the Lebanese. Those very people aren’t doing anything to manifest their rage. Why? Maybe because the Lebanese aren’t Muslim? [...]

July 19. Nonstop battles between Israel and Hezbollah have wreaked a massive humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, driving as many as 500,000 people from their homes.

Durham, North Carolina, July 28

Laila El-Haddad

I feel impotent, a faraway observer, distant and a little too comfortable; and I don't like it. It's so easy to get lost here in your own little world, whatever that world is; it's no wonder the average American knows and cares so little about the outside world, between the longest work hours on the planet and corporate-controlled media in the hours you do have to yourself; I don't blame them in some ways. [...]

News from back home: Yassine's parents were able to flee to Syria, where he has two aunts in refugee camps. His brother's stayed behind in Baalbeck to guard their home, lest the refugee camps, too, become 'accidental targets'. His sister and her family are still in Tyre in the south, and communication is on and off with them. From Gaza: things are grim. We speak regularly with my father's cousin, who tells us that because of the closures, vegetables are being dumped on the local markets, with tomatoes selling for 3 shekels a box (less than a dollar). The problem is, there is no refrigeration, no electricity, and we are talking about high summer; so people can only buy what they can cook, and eat, that day. [...]

July 27. Las Vegas makes it illegal to feed homeless in parks. City officials said that regular offerings from advocates have lured the homeless to parks and led to complaints.

Baghdad, July 30

R.

Although the sun is blinding this time of year in our part of the world, the Middle East is seeing some of its darkest days... I woke up this morning to scenes of carnage and destruction on the television and for the briefest of moments, I thought it was footage of Iraq. It took me a few seconds

July 30. Lebanon. Israeli air strike on Qana kills 57 civilians, 34 of them children.

to realize it was actually Qana in Lebanon. The latest village to see Israeli air strikes. The images were beyond gruesome—body parts and corpses being hauled out from under tons of debris. Wailing relatives and friends, searching for loved ones. So far, according to humanitarian organizations, 34 were children. They killed them while they were sleeping inside their bomb shelters—much like the Amiriyah Shelter massacre in 1991. We saw the corpses of the children on television, lifeless and twisted grotesquely, what remained of their faces frozen in expressions of pain and shock. I just sat there and cried in front of the television. I didn't know I could still feel that sort of sorrow towards what has become a daily reality for Iraqis. It's not Iraq, but it might as well be: it's civilians under lethal attack; it's a country fighting occupation. I'm so frustrated I can't think straight. I'm full of rage against Israel, the US, Britain, Iran and most of Europe. The world is going to go to hell for standing by and allowing the massacre of innocents. For God's sake, 34 children??? The UN is beyond useless. They've gone from a union of nations working for the good of the world (if they ever were even that), to a bunch of gravediggers. They're only good for digging mangled bodies out of the ruins of buildings and helping to identify and put them into mass graves. They won't stop a massacre—they won't even speak out against it—they'll just come by and help clean up the mess. Are the lives of Arabs worth so little? If this had happened in the US or UK or France or China, somebody would already have dropped a nuclear bomb... How can this be happening? Where is the Security Council??? Why haven't they stopped Israel? Ehud Olmert recently told

Amiriyah shelter, in Baghdad, was destroyed by USAF two 'smart bombs' on 13 February 1991 during the Gulf War.

Condi that he needs 10 to 14 more days of bloodshed—and nothing is being done about it! Where are the useless Arab leaders? Can't the pro-American, spineless emirs crawl out of their gold palaces long enough to condemn this taking of lives? Our presidents/leaders are only as influential as their oil barrels are deep. And the world wonders how 'terrorists' are created! A 15-year-old Lebanese girl lost five of her siblings and her parents and home in the Qana bombing... Ehud Olmert might as well kill her now because if he thinks she's going to grow up with anything but hate in her heart towards him and everything he represents, then he's delusional. Is this whole debacle the fine line between terrorism and protecting one's nation? If it's a militia, an insurgent or military resistance—then it's terrorism (unless of course the militia, insurgent(s) and/or resistance are being funded exclusively by the CIA). If it's the Israeli, American or British army, then it's a pre-emptive strike, or a 'war on terror'. No matter the loss of hundreds of innocent lives. No matter the children who died last night—they're only Arabs, after all, right? Right?

Karkur, Israel, August 1

Liza Rosenberg

What the hell is wrong with the Israeli government? [...] I support the premise for this war. It is absurd that we, as a sovereign nation recognized by most other nations in the world (and even supported by a few of them), should have to put up with and accept the continual threats and cross-border incursions made by a terror organization based in another sovereign nation that has turned

July 31. The United Nations Environment Programme has expressed its "grave concern" about oil pollution in Lebanese coastal waters. An oil slick caused by Israeli

based in another sovereign nation that has turned a blind eye for years to its activities and amassing of weapons. It is inconceivable that Israel's citizens should be forced to live with this threat day in and day out, never knowing when a Katyusha rocket will suddenly fall from the sky, never knowing if their soldiers will return from routine border patrols. [...] All of that being said, I am heartsick and nauseous when I see what we are doing in Lebanon. How can we claim to be moral with all of the damage that we are inflicting? Do the Israeli officials realize how petulant and childish they sound with regard to their defense of the Qana debacle (even though it now seems possible that parts of this event may have been staged by the Hezbollah and there is proof that photos appearing in the mainstream media were manipulated)? "We didn't know there were civilians in the building." "We warned them beforehand to leave." Clearly, for whatever reasons, they didn't or couldn't leave, and our excuses sound hollow and lame when so many innocent people are dead. Don't get me wrong. I don't believe that it is entirely our fault—the Hezbollah is just as much to blame for purposely using Lebanese citizens as human shields, and the stories I've heard about their treatment of the local population are absolutely frightening. But still, in our exuberant rush to finish the job, we are committing sloppy, inexcusable errors, errors explained away with poor reasoning that only serves the interests of our unscrupulous, murderous enemies, and once again turns Israel into the world pariah, no matter how righteous and just our long-term goals may be in this case. Granted, I do not have alter-

bombing of the Jiyeh power station now covers 50 miles of coast.

native solutions, but I cannot help but question our methods as we sink deeper and deeper into the mire, and I fear that once all is said and done, we will have set ourselves and our region back by many, many years.

Pushcha Vodytsya, Ukraine, August 4

Veronica Khokhlova

My father has just been taken to a hospital with his third stroke. I happened to be at Besarabka, at home, when the ambulance arrived. I'm back in Pushcha now, with Marta and Mishah. Poor mama.

Baghdad, August 5

R.

Residents of Baghdad are systematically being pushed out of the city. Some families are waking up to find a Kalashnikov bullet and a letter in an envelope with the words "leave your area or else." The culprits behind these attacks and threats are Sadr's followers—the Mahdi Army. It's general knowledge, although no one dares say it out loud. In the last month we've had two different families staying with us in our house, after having to leave their neighborhoods due to death threats and attacks. It's not just Sunnis; Shia, Arabs, Kurds, most of the middle-class areas, are being targeted by militias. Other areas are being overrun by armed Islamists. The Americans have absolutely no control in these areas. Or maybe they simply don't want to control the areas because when there's a clash between Sadr's militia and another militia in a residential neighborhood, they surround the area and watch things happen.

August 3. Lebanon's death toll in more than three weeks of Israel-Hezbollah fighting has reached more than 900, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Saniora said.

August 3. The US Army has begun training the oldest recruits in its history, the result of a concerted effort to fill ranks depleted during the Iraq war. In June, five months after it raised the enlistment age limit from 35 to just shy of 40, the Army raised it to just under 42.

Since the beginning of July, the men in our area have been patrolling the streets. Some of them patrol the rooftops and others sit quietly by the homemade road blocks we have on the major roads leading into the area. You cannot in any way rely on Americans or the government. You can only hope your family and friends will remain alive—not safe, not secure—just alive. That’s good enough.

August 4. 40,000 US troops have deserted since 2000.

For me, June marked the first month I don’t dare leave the house without a *hijab*, or headscarf. I don’t wear a *hijab* usually, but it’s no longer possible to drive around Baghdad without one. It’s just not a good idea. (Take note that when I say ‘drive’ I actually mean ‘sit in the back seat of the car’—I haven’t driven for the longest time.) Going around bare-headed in a car or in the street also puts the family members with you in danger. You risk hearing something you don’t want to hear and then the father or the brother or cousin or uncle can’t just sit by and let it happen. I haven’t driven for the longest time. If you’re a female, you risk being attacked. I look at my older clothes—the jeans and t-shirts and colorful skirts—and it’s like I’m studying a wardrobe from another country, another lifetime. There was a time, a couple of years ago, when you could more or less wear what you wanted if you weren’t going to a public place. If you were going to a friend’s or relative’s house, you could wear trousers and a shirt, or jeans, something you wouldn’t ordinarily wear. We don’t do that anymore, because there’s always that risk of getting stopped in the car and checked by one militia or another. There are no laws that say we have to wear a *hijab* (yet), but there are the men in head-to-toe black and the

turbans, the extremists and fanatics who were liberated by the occupation, and at some point, you tire of the defiance. You no longer want to be seen. I feel like the black or white scarf I fling haphazardly on my head as I walk out the door makes me invisible to a certain degree—it's easier to blend in with the masses shrouded in black. If you're a female, you don't want the attention—you don't want it from Iraqi police, you don't want it from the black-clad militia man, you don't want it from the American soldier. You don't want to be noticed or seen. I have nothing against the *hijab*, of course, as long as it is being worn by choice. Many of my relatives and friends wear a headscarf. Most of them began wearing it after the war. It started out as a way to avoid trouble and undue attention, and now they just keep it on because it makes no sense to take it off. What is happening to the country?

I realized how common it had become only in mid-July when M., a childhood friend, came to say goodbye before leaving the country. She walked into the house, complaining of the heat and the roads, her brother following closely behind. It took me to the end of the visit for the peculiarity of the situation to hit me. She was getting ready to leave before the sun set, and she picked up the beige headscarf folded neatly by her side. As she told me about one of her neighbors being shot, she opened up the scarf with a flourish, set it on her head like a pro, and pinned it snugly under her chin with the precision of a seasoned hijab-wearer. All this without a mirror—like she had done it a hundred times over... Which would be fine, except that M. is Christian. If M. can wear one quietly—so can I.

I've said goodbye this last month to more people than I can count. Some of the 'goodbyes' were hurried and furtive—the sort you say at night to the neighbor who got a death threat and is leaving at the break of dawn, quietly. Some of the 'goodbyes' were emotional and long-drawn, to the relatives and friends who can no longer bear to live in a country coming apart at the seams. Many of the 'goodbyes' were said stoically—almost casually—with a fake smile plastered on the face and the words, "See you soon"... Only to walk out the door and want to collapse with the burden of parting with yet another loved one. During times like these I remember a speech Bush made in 2003: one of the big achievements he claimed was the return of jubilant 'exiled' Iraqis to their country after the fall of Saddam. I'd like to see some numbers about the Iraqis currently outside of the country you are occupying... Not to mention internally displaced Iraqis abandoning their homes and cities. I sometimes wonder if we'll ever know just how many hundreds of thousands of Iraqis left the country this bleak summer. I wonder how many of them will actually return. Where will they go? What will they do with themselves? Is it time to follow? Is it time to wash our hands of the country and try to find a stable life somewhere else?

Pushcha Vodytsya, Ukraine, August 8

Veronica Khokhlova

[...] My mother takes meals to my father twice a day. [...] Since yesterday, father's appetite is back, thank God. She made fish soup for him today, but when she got to the hospital, he wasn't

hungry anymore, because they'd given him some *mannaya kasha* [cream of wheat]. [...] She buys all medication herself—everyone does. She oversees all the injections they administer to my father—many people do. Today, she missed both of his antibiotics shots, though, and is very nervous: if you don't stand over the nurse, she may steal the medicine and resell it to someone else later. Inject water instead. This particular drug is considered expensive, my mother told me: 8 hryvnias (\$1.6) per capsule. So she does have reasons to be nervous. She is not paranoid, no: even the nurses understand her—they would've done the same, a few have already told her. Nurses get 5 hryvnias (\$1) after each shot from my mother. When she had to ask the night-shift nurses to keep checking on my father, she entered their room and gave each one 10 hryvnias—placed the bills into their pockets. She did the same with the ambulance doctor and his assistant on Friday—20 hryvnias to each one, into the pockets of their white gowns, as they were helping my father into the elevator. This was gratitude, though, not a request.

Durham, North Carolina, August 13

Laila El-Haddad

We went berry-picking the other day, scavenging to find what little tart blueberries remained on the thinning bushes during the season's departure. Nearby, we noticed a crop of muscadine grapes, the first time I had ever tried this particular variety. Homesickness getting the best of us, my mother—who came to visit when I did and is now stuck, along with my father, here with us—decided to ask if we can pick the leaves to

August 10. A major terrorist plot to blow up an aircraft has been disrupted by authorities in Britain.

August 14. A cease-fire negotiated by the United Nations went into effect early today, after 33 days of warfare between

make *waraq inab* [stuffed grape leaves]. So we did, nostalgically, remembering our little farm in central Gaza's Zawayda village, now bursting with unpicked, past their prime, plump sea-side grapes. And later at home, we boiled them, and boiled some more. Only to realize this particular variety was too fibrous for our *mahshi*. Durham is no Gaza, I suppose. And muscadine grapes are not Sheikh Ijleen's. Saddened, we stopped wrapping, and called home. Our cousin gives us the latest: the electricity comes on, still a couple of hours a day; but when it does, the municipal water does not; when the water does flow, about once every 3-4 days, there is usually no electricity to pump it to top floor apartments in Gaza's plethora of high-rise towers. So most residents have opted to rent lower-level housing or move. And people can no longer use their water filters, so those who can afford it are opting for bottled water, or drinking water sold by the gallon for a shekel, where the overwhelming majority of people survive in the most 'ordinary' of times, on under 9 shekels a day. [...] And we learn that in July, the Israeli military killed 163 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and 'summer rain' continues. But the headlines here tell us that the days are "tragic" for Israel [...]

Hezbollah fighters and the Israeli military.

August 18. Thousands of bomblets released by shells fired into southern Lebanon litter everything from streets to farmland.

Durham, North Carolina, August 13

Laila El-Haddad

Last year, while visiting Yassine's family in Baalbeck, I met Um Fuad. Um Fuad was married the year of the Nakba [or 'catastrophe' of the formation of Israel on May 15, 1948]. Then a young girl, in the chaos and attacks on her village, Yajur in Akka, she was separated from her husband. She

August 25. Eight percent of all US casualties in Iraq are non-citizen, while only two percent of the military do not have American citizenship.

fled to Jordan, her husband to Lebanon. And for two years they lived apart. “People would see me hanging laundry in the refugee camp there and come ask for my hand, they didn’t realize I was already married, and those who did thought I had given up hope,” she told me. Eventually, two years later, he came for her, making his way across the border from Lebanon into Palestine, ‘infiltrating’, since he was not allowed back to his village as a refugee, and from there to Jordan, where he asked around until he found her. She had taken him for dead or for at least having abandoned her. Together, they snuck back to Lebanon, where their families were. Thirty-four years later, she was widowed. Abu Fuad and two of their sons were killed by an Israeli air strike against Baalbeck in 1984. And now, 58 years later, this second invasion had taken her. She sought refuge in Syria after Baalbeck was targeted a couple of weeks ago, living with hundreds of other Palestinian refugees in a public school. Um Fuad died today, away from all her remaining sons in Lebanon, a twice-over refugee, unable to return to or be buried in her home in Yajur. Another story, another statistic, another ‘inconvenient’ refugee. Um Fuad, dead at 72. May she rest in the peace she never found in her life.

August 28. The majority of US service members charged in the unlawful deaths of Iraqi civilians have been acquitted, found guilty of relatively minor offences or given administrative punishments without trials, according to a Washington Post review of concluded military cases.

Contributors and translators

Here

notes from the present

Lucianna Argentino was born in 1962 in Rome, where she lives. She has published several poetry collections. Her text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

p. 36

Johanna Bishop (icchiojo@tiscali.it) was born in Chicago in 1974, and lived in Pennsylvania and New York before moving to Tuscany in 1998. She translates from Italian into English. In this issue she has translated Franco Toscani's *Football and the 'dream of something'*.

Jihane Bouziane was born in 1982 in Tangier and lives in Casablanca. She works for a market research company. Her diary pages come from the blog *Jihane* (<http://jihaneducaire.over-blog.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them. They were translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

pp. 45, 77, 83

Sebastiano Buonamico lives in Sesto San Giovanni (Italy). A graphic designer and a photographer, his photographs have been shown in several exhibitions. He is the author of the covers of this magazine.

cover

Giusi Busceti was born in 1955 in Milan, where she lives. She has published several poetry collections. Some of her writings have also appeared in various reviews and in the anthology *Italian po-*

etry 1950-1990, edited by G. Ridinger and G. Renello, Dante University of America Press, Boston 1996. Her poem was translated by Tomaso Kemeny.

p. 33

Brigitte Ciaramella (brigitte.ciaramella@fastweb.net.it) was born in 1966 and was brought up bilingual Italian/English. She is a freelance translator with a special interest in literary works. In this issue she has translated the texts by Lucianna Argentino, Germana Pisa, and Jihane Bouziane.

Laila El-Haddad, born in 1978, lives in Gaza. She is a journalist. Her diary pages come from the blog *Raising Yousof: a diary of a mother under occupation* (<http://a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 80, 84, 92, 93

Marc H. Ellis was born in North Miami Beach, Florida, in 1952. He is University Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University (Waco, Texas). He has authored 15 books and edited 5 others, among them: *Israel and Palestine: Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Pluto Press, London-Sterling, Va., 2002; and *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: the Challenge of the Twenty-First Century*, 3rd expanded ed., Baylor University Press, Waco, Tex., 2004. Ellis' many articles have been published in diverse American and international publications, including "International Herald Tribune", "Jordan Times", "Journal of Palestine Studies", "Ha'aretz".

pp. 6, 10, 34, 40, 63

Tomaso Kemeny, born in Budapest in 1938, has lived in Milan since 1948. He teaches English Literature at the University of Pavia. He has published

eight poetry books, a play, a novel and a book on the art of poetry, and has translated Byron, Marlowe and Jozsef. He has written articles, essays, and books on the works of Marlowe, Coleridge, Byron, Carroll, James Joyce and Dylan Thomas. In this issue he has translated the poem by Giusi Busceti.

Veronica Khokhlova was born in 1974 in Kyiv, where she lives, but has lived in Moscow and St. Petersburg on and off for the past five years. She spent nearly three years in the United States, attending university. Her diary pages come from *Neeka's backlog* (<http://vkhokhl.blogspot.com>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 3, 6, 10, 40, 44,
62, 65, 73, 75, 88, 91

Ken Klein, American, lives in central Thailand. A freelance writer, as he describes himself, he has published the novel *Thailand Stories*, Three Pagoda Press, Bangkok 2003, which you can get from him by writing to his e-mail address: kenk2424@yahoo.com.

p. 65

Antonio Maconi was born in Padua (Italy) in 1981. Since 2001, he has been a member of a research group on ethnic minorities in mainland South-east Asia. In 2002, he joined his first field-mission, spending three months along the border between Vietnam, Laos and south-western China. In 2005, after his graduation in Anthropology, he moved to Hanoi where he currently lives. He is now a UNDESA Fellow, working at the Development Cooperation Office of the Italian Embassy, where he is in charge of projects on ethnic minorities and cultural heritage preservation.

p. 48

Giorgio Mascitelli was born in 1966 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. He is a teacher. Apart from

short stories and writings that appeared in magazines, he has published two novels.

p. 12

Germana Pisa was born in 1941 in Milan, Italy, where she lives. She is actively involved in the peace and environmentalist movements. Her text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella.

p. 11

R. “I am 26 years old, I’m a woman who lives in Baghdad. I have a degree in computer sciences but I currently work from the house because it is not very safe in other places. Before the war, I worked for a private computer company.” Her diary pages published here come from the blog *Baghdad burning* (riverbendblog.blogspot.com). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 16, 84, 88

Liza Rosenberg, 38-years-old, was raised in Schenectady, NY, and has been living in Israel for 15 years. She lives in Karkur with her husband and their two year-old son, and works as a technical writer in a hi-tech firm. Her email address is mashehu_mashehu@yahoo.com. Her diary pages published here come from the blog *something something* (somethingsomething.blogspot.com). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

pp. 3, 75, 78, 82, 86

Franco Toscani, an essayist and a teacher, was born in 1955 in Piacenza, Italy, where he lives. His writings have been published on several newspapers and magazines. He is the co-author, together with S. Piazza, of *Cultura europea e diritti umani* (“European culture and human rights”), Cleup, Padova 2003. He has also published a collection of poetry. His essay was translated by Johanna Bishop, whom we thank.

p. 21

Subscription

Here

notes from the present

The cost of a **subscription** to 3 issues, either the Italian or English edition, is 25 Euros in Italy, 30 (\$38) in Europe and the Mediterranean area, 35 (\$45) in the rest of the world. However, since these prices are too high for many countries, you may ask for a **reduced-price subscription**. You can subscribe by **credit card** providing us with its number and expiry date via fax or phone (0039-02-57406574); or you can send the money through a **postal money order** to “Here-notes from the present”, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy; or pay by **bank transfer** on the following bank account registered in the name of “Qui-appunti dal presente”: national bank code (BBAN) V 05584 01624 000000025101; international bank code (IBAN) IT 03 V 05584 01624 000000025101. Please, remember to indicate your name, address, the object of payment and which edition you wish to receive. For further information, please call or send a fax to the number 0039-02-57406574, or write to massimo.parizzi@alice.it.

Last issues

Number 12, “pausing for reflection”, October 2005 - 15-30 May: diary pages from Italy (Germana Pisa, Marco Giovenale, Maria Granati, Lucianna Argentino), and Croatia (Drazan Gunjaca) - **Bloodied Dog**, by Jáchym Topol - **Poetry and the Present: Foreword**, by Massimo Parizzi; *The Present of Capital and Poetry in Exodus*, by Ennio Abate; *Present in and of Itself*, by Giorgio Mascitelli; *Poetry and the Present*, by Lelio Scanavini - **9-27 June:** from Italy (L. Argentino, M. Granati), and Palestine (Dorothy Lale) - **On the Jewish Civil War and the New Prophetic**, by Marc Ellis; **Zionism versus Judaism!**, by Azzam Tamimi - **1-12 July:** from Italy (Paola Turrone, L. Argentino, Marina Massenz, M. Parizzi) - **From Indochina. Travel Notes**, by M. Parizzi; **The Traveller’s Ego: Upturns and Downturns** by M. Massenz - **8-23 August:** from India (Carol Faison), and Italy (L. Argentino, M. Granati) - **Does the Left already Know Everything?: Foreword**, by M. Parizzi; *What does the Left already Know?*, by Christian Grecco; *The Politics of Results*, by M. Parizzi; *The Left that Knows Too Much*, by G. Mascitelli - **August 24. The Remaining 99.5%**, by Amira Hass; from the Israeli newspaper “Ha’aretz” - **24-25 August:** diary pages from Italy (Laura Zanetti, Alfredo Menghetti)

Number 13, “ordinary life”, February 2006 - 3-5 September: diary pages from the United States (Marc Ellis), France (Maddalena Chataignier), and Italy (Mariela De Marchi) - **The Crack-Up. Francis Scott Fitzgerald and the ‘Jazz Age’**, by Bruno De Maria - **11 September-3 October:** from Iraq (R.), the United States (M. Ellis, Mazin Qumsiyeh), and Italy (M. De Marchi, Marina Massenz, Gianni Meazza) - **The Cucumber and the Cactus. A Palestinian Christian story**, by M. Qumsiyeh - **7 October-11 November:** from the United States (M. Ellis), Italy (Maria Granati, Daniela Di Falco, Germana Pisa, Liliana Ugolini, Massimo Parizzi), and France (Andrea Inglese) - **I was Eighteen Years Old. I got my Call-up Notice and at the Beginning of September 1943....**, by Dionigi Serra, alias Nisio - **11-14 November** from Italy (M. De Marchi and Paola Turrone), and France (A. Inglese) - **The Davy Crockett Cap**, by M. Massenz - **14 November-30 December:** from the United States (M. Ellis), Italy (Lucianna Argentino and G. Pisa), and Iraq (R.)

Number 14, “happy birthday, Yousuf”, June 2005 - 2 January-14 February: diary pages from Gaza (Laila El-Haddad), and Iraq (R.) - **The Praise of Idiocy**, by Bruno De Maria - **23-27 February:** from Iraq (R.) - **One Night (or a Thousand)**, by Roberto Giannoni - **27 February-22 April:** from Gaza (Laila El-Haddad), Israel (Marc Ellis), and Iraq (R.) - **From an Old Man**, by Giorgio De Maria - **22 April:** from Gaza (Laila El-Haddad)

Supplement to/supplemento a **Qui - appunti dal presente**, 15, October/ottobre 2006. Via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy; tel-fax: 0039-02-57406574; e-mail: massimoparizzi@alice.it; url: www.quiappuntidalpresente.it; www.quihere.eu. Printing/stampa: Mediagea, via Cadorna 49/51, 20090 Vimodrone (Milano). Registration/registrazione: Court of/Tribunale di Milano, no. 619, 26 ottobre 2001. Chief editor/direttore responsabile: Massimo Parizzi.